



RESTORING the SOCIAL FABRIC

Challenges and Opportunities to Strengthen the Revitalization Process and Community Health in Park Heights, Baltimore

SUMMARY

- Park Heights is one of the city’s oldest and largest neighborhoods and was previously a central part of Baltimore’s growing economy, with thriving shops, restaurants, movie theaters, and a branch library.
- Through a collaborative effort among city officials, local institutes and organizations, and residents, the Baltimore City Planning Commission adopted the Park Heights Master Plan in 2006. Four years later, the Vacants to Value initiative provided additional tools and support mechanisms to address ongoing challenges with vacancies in the neighborhood.
- Drawing on interviews conducted from 2017 to 2018 with stakeholders in the Garrison Street and Oakley Street Community Development Clusters in Park Heights, preliminary information is presented on the ways in which vacant properties and efforts to restore them have impacted the community’s health and well-being.
- A range of challenges, such as a uniquely large neighborhood footprint and lack of alignment in planning, messaging, and actions among community groups, the public, and private agencies, has delayed progress in Park Heights.
- Investment in Park Heights’ social dimensions along with the development of its physical infrastructure is necessary to facilitate more sustainable progress and to, importantly, advance community health.
- This case example is part of a series of deep-dives in three communities. The full report, *Revisiting Revitalization*, provides a detailed look at community health lessons from Baltimore City’s Vacants to Value Initiative.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

Park Heights, one of Baltimore’s oldest and largest neighborhoods, is situated in the city’s northwest corner, approximately 10 miles from the downtown central business district and within two miles of the Baltimore County line.¹ A largely residential area, it is home to an estimated 30,000 residents, comprising 12 smaller neighborhoods that collectively span 1,500 acres. Current residents identify two different Park Heights, a “Northern” and a “Southern” Park Heights, with Northern Parkway as the line of demarcation.

The Garrison and Oakley Community Development Clusters are part of the Pimlico/Arlington/Hilltop neighborhood^a in “Southern” Park Heights (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1 Garrison and Oakley Community Development Clusters in the Pimlico/Arlington/Hilltop Community Statistical Area.



^a This neighborhood designation follows the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance-Jacob France Institute Community Statistical Area.

Two major roadways, Park Heights Avenue and Reisterstown Road, run north-south through the neighborhood and function as the area's main streets; the neighborhood has limited commercial retail and some industrial activity that can be found on its western edge. Major institutions are also located throughout the Park Heights community, including the Levindale LifeBridge Health Center, Sinai Hospital, Pimlico Race Course, as well as educational and social service institutions.

History of Park Heights

The history of Park Heights dates to the early nineteenth century, when the neighborhood was a central part of Baltimore's growing economy. Reisterstown Road served as a main route for transporting wheat and corn from farms northwest of the city to the port, which then shipped the products to various parts of the world. A bustling middle-class neighborhood at the time, Park Heights thrived with shops, restaurants, movies theaters, sporting events, and other entertainment venues. As economic opportunities grew, the neighborhood quickly attracted European Jewish immigrants up until the 1950s. Beginning in the 1960s, Park Heights experienced a drastic population shift due to a substantial decline in manufacturing and industrial jobs, discriminatory housing policies, and predatory lending, resulting in the concentrations of white American and European Jewish residents in "Northern" Park Heights and African-American and immigrant residents in "Southern" Park Heights. From 2000 to 2016, the percentage of African-American residents remained relatively constant, at around 95 percent. The composition of residents by age, however, shifted over the same period, with a decrease by 11.1 percentage points in children and adolescents under 18 years old (from 27.2 to 16.1 percent) and an increase by 4.6 percentage points in adults 25 to 64 years old (from 49.5 to 54.1 percent).^{2,3}

Current Neighborhood Conditions

In recent decades, the broader Park Heights community has experienced its share of challenges, including a declining population, housing and economic instability, and concerns related to crime and drug activity. The current median household income in this neighborhood is roughly \$14,000 less than the city-wide figure of \$44,000, and over 40 percent of children, many of whom are from single-parent households, live below the poverty line.² The unemployment rate of 17.3 percent is higher than

the city's rate of 12.8 percent, and nearly one in four residents^b has less than a high-school degree.²

Due to historical disinvestment and the loss of residents in Park Heights, the overall housing environment remains severely distressed. The vacant building density ranks in the city's top one-third, with the latest numbers estimating nearly 1,100 vacant buildings per 10,000 housing units, compared to the 560 vacant buildings per 10,000 housing units at the city level.⁴ Furthermore, the median home sales price in this area has decreased, from an estimated \$48,000 in 2010 to \$40,000 in 2016.²

In regards to safety, the homicide rate has dropped significantly in recent years; however, homicide rates remained twice that of the city's, at 7.4 homicides per 10,000 residents in 2015. Moreover, the density of liquor, tobacco, carryout, and corner stores in the neighborhood are greater than the city's average, creating important challenges regarding access to substances and foods that are detrimental to the community's health and well-being. The leading cause of death is heart disease, followed by cancer, homicide, and diabetes.⁴

VACANTS TO VALUE IN PARK HEIGHTS

Launched in 2010 by the mayor and housing commissioner at the time, Vacants to Value (V2V) is a multipronged initiative to reduce the number of vacant properties and spur revitalization in declining neighborhoods. The Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) leads the program's implementation.⁵

V2V strategically deploys one or more interventions in selected areas by evaluating the market demand for housing, based on the city's housing market typology, and overlaying this information with an inventory of vacant properties.⁵ This strategic approach helps to characterize the severity of vacancy, locates areas with the greatest opportunity to restore vacant properties in an emerging market, and informs the implementation of V2V strategies.

Within the 1500-acre footprint of Park Heights, the Garrison Street and Oakley Street blocks were declared Community Development Clusters (CD Clusters) in 2013 and 2017, respectively, due to growing developer interest. The V2V CD Cluster model

^bPopulation age 25+ years.



facilitates partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit developers interested in investing in these areas, by removing barriers to developer ownership and rehabilitation.

For example, the V2V model expedites the process through streamlined code enforcement, facilitates the transfer of property ownership through a receivership program, and offers home-buying incentives that developers can use for marketing purposes. Furthermore, restoration in clusters ensures that nearby residents in stable or newly repaired homes are not negatively affected by homes that remain boarded up for extended periods.

To better prepare the public, the V2V program hosted a series of informational workshops and housing tours in Park Heights, beginning in 2012, called Imagine Baltimore: Neighborhood Rehab Tours. These workshops shared knowledge on how to buy city-owned properties, rehab and market properties, and use home-buyer incentives.⁶

Prelude to V2V

In fall 2003, the city's Department of Planning, DHCD, Baltimore Development Corporation, and the Department of Transportation formed a steering committee and hired a multidisciplinary team to develop the Park Heights Master Plan. Through a participatory planning process—involving Park Heights residents, business owners, community leaders, city staff, and elected officials—the planning team conducted neighborhood open houses, community workshops, neighborhood assessments, surveys, and interviews to gather public opinion and build consensus for the plan's vision and recommendations. The Baltimore City Planning Commission adopted the Park Heights Master Plan on February 2, 2006, and in 2008 amendments were made to the plan as a result of community feedback on the Park Heights Urban Renewal Ordinance and Park Heights Rezoning bills (Figure 2).

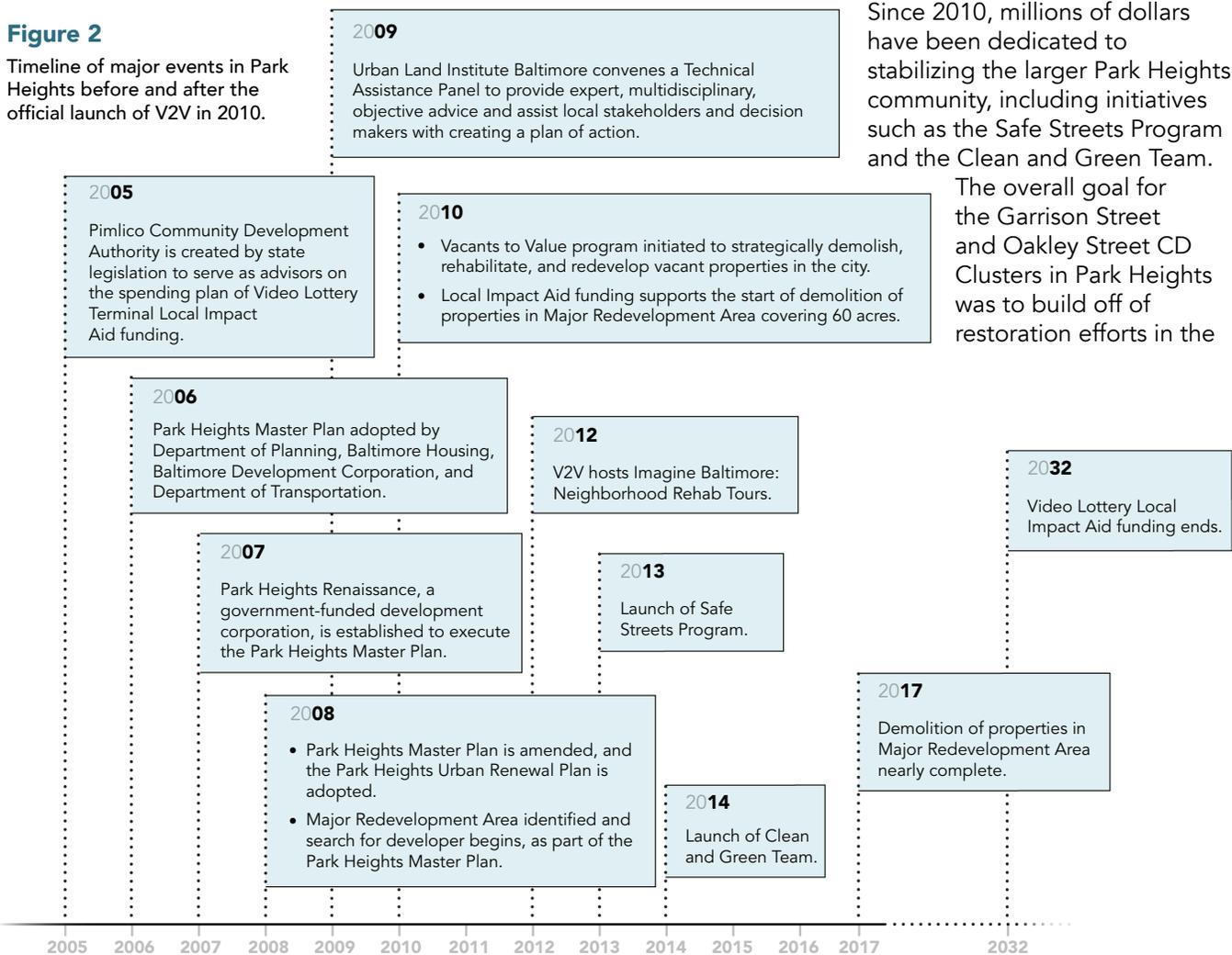
V2V in Action

Since 2010, millions of dollars have been dedicated to stabilizing the larger Park Heights community, including initiatives such as the Safe Streets Program and the Clean and Green Team.

The overall goal for the Garrison Street and Oakley Street CD Clusters in Park Heights was to build off of restoration efforts in the

Figure 2

Timeline of major events in Park Heights before and after the official launch of V2V in 2010.



major redevelopment area, a 60-acre plot of land centered at Park Heights and Woodland Avenues.

Figure 3 illustrates the vacant building notice dynamics in the Garrison and Oakley Street CD Clusters. Of the suite of V2V program strategies, the following were implemented:

1. Streamlined Disposition

To expedite the process of transferring vacant buildings to home buyers and developers, the city's Land Resources Division created a clear, predictable, and expedient process to make selling city-owned properties three times faster.

2. Targeted Demolition

In some areas where severely distressed properties are unlikely to be restored, V2V implements targeted demolition and land repurposing.

3. Streamlined Code Enforcement

Streamlined code enforcement is implemented in areas with scattered vacant properties in a relatively healthy housing market. Building code violations, carrying a \$900 penalty, are issued to spur rehabilitation; if the second citation receives no response, V2V can file for a receivership case to move abandoned properties into auction. Properties in CD Clusters, however, bypass the first and second citation and move directly to receivership.

4. Neighborhood Improvements.

For privately owned properties, the city's Division of Green, Healthy, and Sustainable Homes offered services to restore windows and

exterior porches and to update heating units in homes.

COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS OF V2V

In-depth interviews with residents and community leaders conducted by the authors revealed several pathways through which vacant properties, and their rehabilitation process, have impacted community health in this context.

Social Infrastructure and Sense of Community

With increasing vacancies in the neighborhood, residents spoke to the consequent changes in the structure of the community. They shared that prior to the vacancies, households with a minimum of five members were common, and children had safe spaces and peers with whom to play. In addition, store owners and church leaders lived, worked, and worshipped in the community. One resident described a previously stronger sense of social responsibility:

"Yeah, [there were] more older family members. And, like I said, it was quieter. Neighbors helped neighbors out. They looked out for each other. As you see, we don't have too many neighbors anymore." –Resident

Upward Mobility

Community members described the ways in which the process of neighborhood revitalization should advance community health by creating opportunities for education, employment, and entrepreneurship:

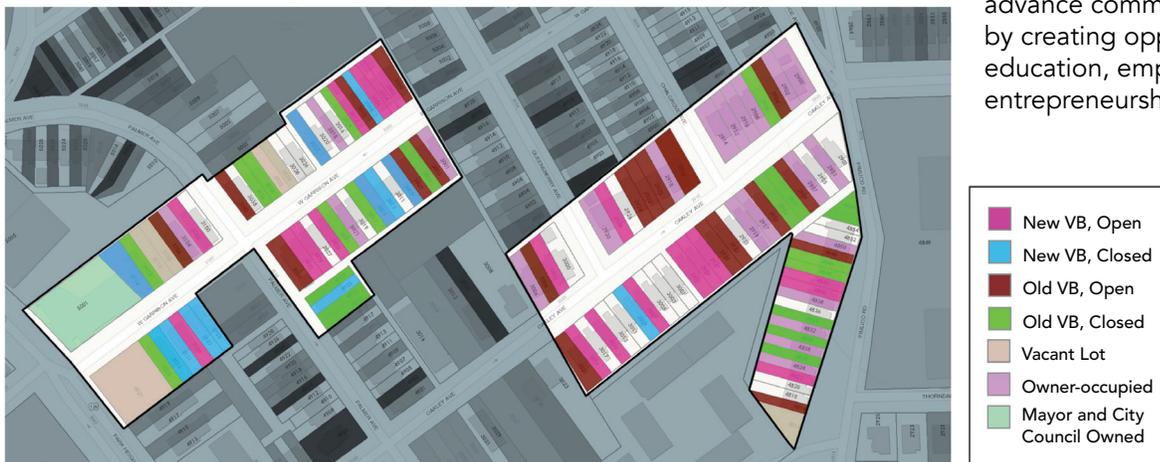


Figure 3
Vacant building notice dynamics in Park Heights' Garrison Street and Oakley Street Community Development Clusters (June 2019).

“You wanna rebuild the neighborhood and create a neighborhood, an environment where people wanna live and stay and things like that. But you also want people to be safe physically, mentally, and you want the schools to do what they need to do as far as educating the children.” –Resident

Cleanliness and Safety

Residents also shared accounts of the ways in which unattended properties attracted illegal disposal, including tires, furniture, and other debris:

“Vacant properties and lots create an environment that attracts illegal dumping, makes a neighborhood appear vulnerable...Also challenges with fire hazards and water damage... road safety.” –Resident

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The long-standing interest in re-energizing investment in the broader Park Heights neighborhood is evident (**Figure 2**). With the adoption of the Park Heights Master Plan, the city made a commitment to strengthen the neighborhood and advance the well-being of residents, businesses, and institutions. However, in the face of many obstacles, the V2V program has shown delayed progress in this neighborhood. V2V is well positioned to build on lessons learned to strengthen the community for a healthier Park Heights.

Challenges in the Neighborhood Revitalization Process

Our preliminary findings reveal challenges related to V2V's process of neighborhood revitalization. Specifically, themes from stakeholder interviews indicated challenges in the following areas.

1. Leadership and a Unified Voice

The size of a designated neighborhood can influence all stages of the planning and revitalization process, from assessment of neighborhood needs, visioning of goals, formal planning, design, communication of the plan, and its implementation. Park Heights Renaissance, a government-funded

development corporation, was assigned to represent residents, businesses, religious institutions, schools, and other stakeholders in Park Heights and to spearhead the Park Heights Master Plan. However, interviews revealed that Park Heights' unusually large footprint and division of sub-neighborhoods created complex, challenging neighborhood dynamics that affected the administration of V2V, despite the Garrison and Oakley CD Clusters' much smaller size relative to the entire neighborhood. Additionally, competing priorities within the broader Park Heights community diverted and diffused attention and funding and increased barriers to building coordinated support:

“...No strong leadership, and those who were in leadership [positions] were very selective of who they let in to help...You have the church leaders. You have the community association leaders. You have the political leaders. So it all depends who wants to be in charge for this particular issue. You have the business associations... But everybody plays a part of not working collectively.” –Resident and community organization member

2. Community Readiness and V2V Progress

Community efforts to interact with the V2V initiative have been managed less effectively compared to other CD Clusters. Furthermore, messaging and expectations of developers, V2V decision-makers, and residents about redevelopment plans have been misaligned, leading to delayed progress as well as frustration, stress, and disillusionment among community members. For example, V2V offers financial incentives to attract new residents to Park Heights, and while homeowners new to the area may use the program's offerings, newcomers are reportedly unlikely to stay long, thereby leaving properties at high risk of vacancy again. V2V also offers relocation incentives for homeowners in properties located in a row of vacant properties planned for demolition or restoration, which also results in the departure of residents. Interviews with neighborhood residents, particularly those who have called Park Heights home for many decades, revealed that the biggest changes since V2V have been the displacement of neighbors and the demolition of properties,



with limited investment in established residents and homes:

“We’ve demolished but not put nothing up...You pump the community up and then nothing happens, so they lose hope. They don’t believe you no more. If the community don’t believe you, how are you gonna get them [to] tell somebody else to believe in the community?” –Resident and community organization member

3. Delineation of a Revitalization Strategy

The Park Heights Master Plan has served as the guiding document for revitalization efforts in this neighborhood. However, the lack of a fully developed short- and long-term strategy, detailing an explicit time frame and action plan through which programs like V2V may be leveraged, has created an environment of short-term solutions in pockets of Park Heights that have prevented progress overall. Furthermore, interviews highlight the need for revitalization efforts to not exacerbate an already challenged foundation in the community. For example, demolition efforts have successfully removed physically unstable structures, but attention to maintaining sites post-demolition has fallen short. Failure to sustain physical orderliness, including the elimination of illegal dumping, litter, and tall grass, has undermined V2V’s demolition strategy by creating a perception of ineffectiveness. Additionally, in the process of addressing vacant homes, the city and other stakeholders must ensure that existing homes and homeowners are not left behind but, instead, are strengthened along with new development. This includes the safeguarding of spaces that neighborhood residents view to be vital for community well-being:

“Change is a good thing, but it’s also a bad thing when you’re not helping those who are already there...The good thing is they doing something finally with the houses, but bad thing is, they not helping, again. They not helping those who are caught [in] between...At least let change happen for the positive instead of the negative that been happening. I’ve been seeing some neighborhoods that they focused on, and I hate to say it, but they been focusing on the wrong communities and the wrong areas.” –Resident

OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY HEALTH

Despite these challenges, our findings indicate critical opportunities to support more sustained progress in Park Heights, particularly strategies for rebuilding the social fabric of the community along with the development of physical infrastructures:

1. Strengthen Social Dimensions to Advance Collective Impact

Social dimensions refer to the quantity, diversity, and quality of social relationships that hold a community together. Park Heights is fortunate to have had a history of residents and community partners committed to the neighborhood’s well-being. However, years of disinvestment suggest the need to restore networks and the social fabric across this community. Prior research has asserted that in environments with limited resources, entrepreneurial social infrastructure is “a necessary ingredient” for uniting people and resources for collective impact in community development.⁷

To build collective impact, one approach is to first determine the community’s level of readiness and then identify opportunities to strengthen capacity in mobilizing resources and building networks through the establishment of a “backbone” organization, i.e., an entity representing community members that coordinates the needs of cross-sector groups to achieve collective impact. To do so, decision-makers driving V2V planning and implementation should complete an assessment, before any action is taken, to determine the status of social dimension needs in Park Heights. For example, what mechanisms are needed to establish or further support a backbone organization in Park Heights? This entity could also enable a more place- and health-conscious revitalization process by instituting formal, ongoing processes for community participation in the planning of V2V revitalization, such as a regular forum in which community residents can advance their ideas, share concerns, and provide feedback on

development plans. Further, V2V could facilitate employment and entrepreneurship opportunities related to neighborhood redevelopment in Park Heights. For example, similar to the model used in the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster, a partnership with Details (De)construction could facilitate job training and creation through its comprehensive construction training program.

2. Align V2V Strategies With the Neighborhood Master Plan and Unique Community Needs

Without the consideration of historic, cultural, and economic inequities, V2V implementers run the risk of perpetuating downfalls of neighborhood revitalization (e.g., displacement and diminishing of social networks).⁸ The ways in which community members engage with V2V throughout the revitalization process are critical for the success of the initiative and community health. Furthermore, communities benefit most when planning processes not only meet foundational criteria but also allow tailoring to each neighborhood's unique needs.

To do this, local government officials, developers, and other key stakeholders need to explicitly commit to address these inequities by engaging inclusively with community members and by using tools to foster deliberative processes with people directly affected by initiatives such as V2V. Revitalization efforts could benefit from establishing a formal alliance between V2V, community leaders of Park Heights, and prospective developer(s) that enables more-inclusive redevelopment planning that is place- and health-conscious in the context of Park Heights. Specifically, this partnership should involve revisiting the neighborhood master plan, identifying opportunities for V2V strategies to build on the plan, and specifying short- and long-term approaches for addressing vacant properties in Park Heights' CD Clusters. For example, appointed community residents could work with V2V to identify vacant homes in need of boarding up to secure the property, create job opportunities in demolition and construction, and collaboratively develop plans for the maintenance and reuse of vacant lots post-demolition. Ultimately, human and financial resources could be pooled so that entities leverage one another's strengths at each

stage of revitalization in a way that ensures successful restoration of vacant properties and positive, sustainable change in the broader community

3. Establish Short- and Long-Term Strategies to Assure Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization

A clear plan with short- and long-term time frames is necessary to safeguard progress in revitalization efforts. While a neighborhood-scale master plan can serve as a guide for working toward a long-term vision, it is not sufficient to ensure that goals will be met and in a timely manner. Therefore, as vacant properties undergo demolition or revitalization in a neighborhood, plans should also be in place for the shorter term. To implement the most effective plans and identify strengths and weaknesses of revitalization processes, a stronger culture of monitoring and evaluation is also needed. Drawing from examples in the literature, city planners and developers can use various metrics to assess the quality of a plan, including its vision, goals, level of supporting evidence, implementation strategies, interorganizational coordination, and compliance.⁹

In particular, trash and illegal dumping on vacant properties and lots were prominent concerns of community members. Vacant buildings also reportedly served as hideouts for squatters and provided space for illegal activities. Illicit activities, and their associated violence, engender fear and mistrust and contribute to the withdrawal of community members, particularly over long periods when such issues have not been properly addressed or have worsened. Therefore, V2V can better support community health by establishing mechanisms to ensure short- and long-term site control and maintenance of vacant properties and lots. Because the process can take varying lengths of time, from identifying an investor to the start of demolition or restoration activities, V2V should seek opportunities to build on existing community strengths, such as the LifeBridge Health Clean and Green Team. Additionally, V2V could seek opportunities to align with public health experts and other community-based groups to conduct regular



neighborhood assessments, build capacity in sustainable sanitation, and develop a neighborhood plan for regular short- and long-term site control and maintenance.

CONCLUSION

The long-standing interest in re-energizing investment in the broader Park Heights neighborhood is evident. With the adoption of the Park Heights Master Plan, the city made a commitment to strengthen the neighborhood and advance the well-being of residents, businesses, and institutions. However, in the face of many obstacles, the V2V program has shown delayed progress in this neighborhood. V2V is well positioned to build on lessons learned to strengthen the community for a healthier Park Heights.

RESEARCH METHODS

To generate this case example, the authors used a mixed-methods approach, including a literature review and stakeholder interviews. Qualitative data included 25 in-depth interviews with representatives of various sectors, including V2V, the Department of Housing and Community Development, developers, neighborhood

association leaders, non-profit organizations, and community residents. Interviews were conducted from October 2017 to October 2018. Each interview ranged from one to two hours, and community stakeholders member-checked the findings.

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