

Evaluation Brief: Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds

Key Findings from the 2024 Grantee Reflection & Connection
Sessions (GRCs)

**HEALTH
RESOURCES
IN ACTION**



Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds (MA CHHAF) represent a statewide investment in community-led approaches to improving population health. Administered through a partnership among the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), the Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence (AGE), and Health Resources in Action (HRiA) as fiscal agent, and in collaboration with an Advisory Committee, the Funds had allocated approximately \$45.9 million to 82 awardees across three cohorts as of April 2026. The Funds pursue an equitable grantmaking model designed to address the root causes of health inequity—including structural and institutional racism, poverty, and entrenched power imbalances—through community-centered policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change.

This evaluation digest presents findings from 2024 Grantee Reflection and Connection Sessions (GRCs), semi-facilitated cross-sector discussions with awardees designed to yield qualitative insights into the broader context PSE change operates within in communities across the state. This discussion approach was developed, piloted, and refined by the HRiA Evaluation Team in collaboration with an Evaluation Workgroup comprised of awardees and other key stakeholders. In total, 22 GRC sessions were held from June-August 2024, engaging 106 unique individuals from 50+ awardee organizations. These participants were from the Funds' Cohorts 1 (2020-2026) and Cohort 2 (2022-2027) award cycles.

The findings demonstrate that community-led PSE change is actively underway across the Commonwealth and that awardees are tirelessly advancing innovative change solutions that are community-engaged, equity-centered, and sustainable.

Executive Summary

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

Grantee Reflection and Connection Sessions (GRCs) were semi-facilitated conversations, utilized as part of the evaluation of the MA Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds. Held between June – August 2024, GRCs explored policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change and health and racial equity across the fields that Funds grantees work within. In total, 22 GRCs were held with 106 unique participants. Key themes that emerged across GRCs were:

- Community-led PSE change is happening across Massachusetts.
- Grantees are working across fields and systems to address root causes of health inequities to ultimately improve health outcomes across communities.
- Projects supported by the Funds are creating new processes and working to overhaul existing structures to create systems which center and are driven by people with lived experience .
- Grantees have played integral roles in PSE change wins and have championed successful efforts to change policy and implement systems change within their organizations, their partners, and institutions.
- Grantees’ partner networks, including community members, are integral to bringing all the pieces of the work together.
- There are opportunities for funders to act more strategically to facilitate the ongoing sustainability of the work they support. The ideal role of funders as one that is flexible and realistic.

Contact machhafunds@hria.org for more information.



Background

About The Funds

- **Investing resources in MA communities** to improve population health outcomes through community-led policy, systems, and environmental change approaches.
- **Statewide distribution of Community Health Initiative funds** from the updated Determination of Need regulation.
- **Partnership between** MA Department of Public Health, Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence, and Health Resources in Action; in collaboration with the Advisory Committee.
- **\$63 million** allocated to **112 awardees** across three cohorts as of July 2026.



— **Massachusetts** —
**COMMUNITY HEALTH AND
HEALTHY AGING FUNDS**

Why Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change?

- Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies are a way of making **sustainable, lasting change within a community** to support healthy environments and behaviors across populations.
- These strategies **create or change infrastructure and modify the contexts** in which people live to improve community conditions that promote health. PSE changes are often made in combination with each other.



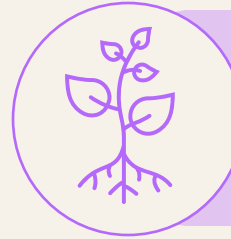
This content was informed in part by resources from the [Rural Health Information Hub](#), [Health Trust](#), Mass in Motion, and The Food Trust.

Example PSE Change Initiatives

PSE change is a broad topic. A few examples of projects supported by the Funds include:



Developing and maintaining a free online housing search tool to promote access to affordable and safe housing.



Establishing an urban agriculture policy and a farm-to-retail model for a community farm.



Empowering multilingual seniors to improve transit justice and public transportation.



Supporting justice-involved youth in achieving financial security through employment and leadership skills development.



Facilitating a network spanning 30 towns to develop and guide the community health improvement plan.

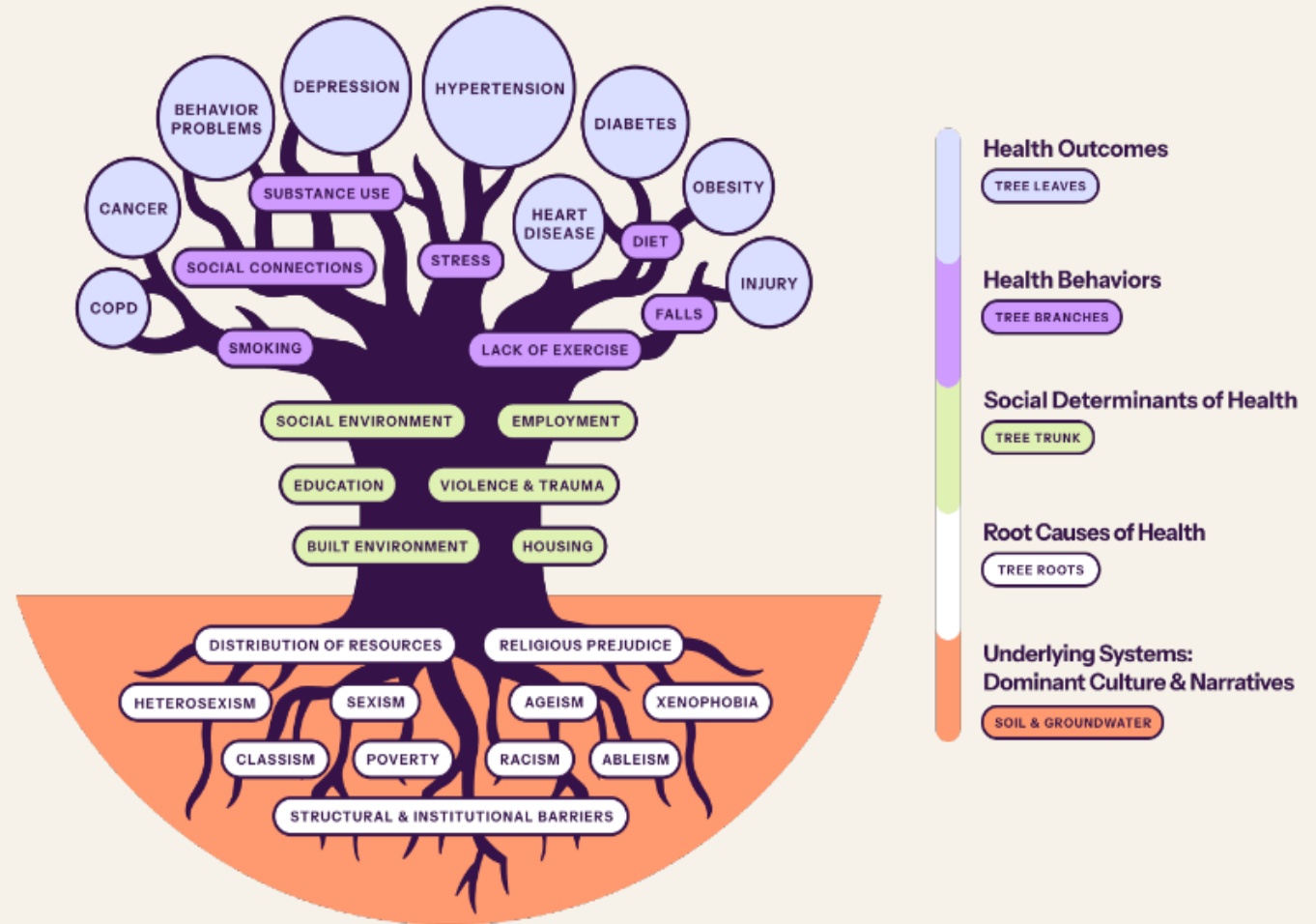


Integrating low vision awareness and resources into age-friendly planning for older adults.

Health EquiTree Model

The Funds' strategy is also informed by the Health EquiTree Model, which connects health outcomes and behaviors to social determinants health and root causes of inequity. Grantees' work focuses on these area to improve health outcomes for communities across the state.

Utilizing this model, the GRCs were organized around these social determinants and root causes (the tree trunk and tree roots). This helped to ensure that grantees saw their work fit into a least one of the GRCs topics.





Methodology

Introduction to GRCs

Grantee Reflection and Connection Sessions (GRCs) are semi-facilitated conversations with Funds grantees working on similar social determinants of health and systems (e.g., housing, healthy aging). In 2024, these conversations explored these fields, particularly with regards to policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change and health and racial equity.

The model for GRCs was developed based on traditional focus groups (“Reflection”) but adapted to allow for more interaction between participants (“Connection”), with a goal of gathering data that tells the story of the Funds and its impact, while also providing the space for grantees to learn from each other. This model for data collection is intended to be valuable to both evaluators and grantees, while upholding the Funds’ commitment to minimizing reporting burdens for grantees.

These conversations were held through 90-minute, semi-facilitated virtual sessions. Grantees from the Cohort 1 (2020-2026) and Cohort 2 (2022-2027) participated in GRCs. Each grantee initiative was asked to have their project lead and 1-3 additional people (including other project staff, staff from partner organizations, and community members) participate in a GRC.

Participation in GRCs

From June – August 2024, 22 GRC sessions were held with 106 unique participants, with many people participating in multiple sessions. The GRCs were organized around the following topics:

- Housing
- Healthy Aging
- Healthy Aging and the Built Environment
- Rural Communities and the Built Environment
- Rural Communities and the Social Environment
- Social Environment
- Violence, Incarceration, and Transitional Justice
- Access to Services
- Food Systems
- Mental and Behavioral Health
- Youth Mental and Behavioral Health



Findings

Key themes from GRCs

- **Understanding the Field:** Grantees' perceptions of who was a part of their fields and who was missing, grantee organizations' own role within the field, cohesion (or lack thereof) across the field.
- **Racial and Health Equity:** The most important aspects of racial and health equity that need to be advanced within the field and the role that grantees' organizations play in moving that work forward.
- **Community Engagement:** The roles the community plays in the work – as leaders, stakeholders, partners, and more – and the strategies used to facilitate and sustain authentic community engagement.
- **Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change:** Receptivity within the field to PSE change strategies, PSE wins in those fields in the past year, and facilitators and barriers to further wins.
- **Lessons for Funders:** What Funders could do to move the field beyond a grant cycle to grant cycle model and support sustainability.



GRC Key Findings

Understanding the Field

GRCs were organized around the shared fields that grantees are working within (e.g., housing, healthy aging). The sessions explored the makeup of these fields by exploring grantees' perceptions of who was a part of their fields and who was missing, as well as understanding grantee organizations' own role within the field. GRCs also explored cohesion (or lack thereof) across the field.

Intersecting Systems

Grantees described navigating the many intersecting systems that make up the fields that they are working to change

- Grantees are often working at the intersection of systems and fields to determine ways for them to work together towards policy, system and environmental (PSE) change
- Systems that may not be thought of as being a part of a field often still influence or impact people's ability to navigate and access services and supports

*"We're about a fifteen-town region. We encompass three different counties. About fifteen years ago, when **the towns realized we needed each other, they started a coalition**. It started with [a] Hospital but brought in all the people in the region."*

*"**People are looking for jobs, but transportation is an issue**. The halfway houses are in a place where public transportation sucks...Construction jobs are willing to take people with a criminal record, but they are on-site and you need a car to get there."*

Role of the Government

Federal, state, and local governments are players across the fields that grantees are working in both in facilitative and barrier-creating ways

- Some grantees described governmental bodies, particularly local government, as levers of change within their fields, where others described them as barriers to progress
- State and federal government agencies were often described as being conveners in the fields grantees are working in

*“Part of our program is we use the mechanism of local government. **Our local policy makers are part of the equation.**”*

*“The **government structures that we’re operating in haven’t changed** in hundreds of years...In general, there haven’t been any particularly big structural changes to how these decisions are made by [local government] **but our population and needs have changed.**”*

*“We worked with [Housing and Urban Development Technical Assistance Collaborative] HUD TAC – a technical assistance coalition of **fifty plus partners working together.**”*

Community Members

Grantees described community members and people with lived experience as important players in the fields they work in

- Despite the important role they play, grantees described community members as often missing from important conversations
- Many grantees described their work as centering the voices of community as central to advancing PSE change in their fields

*“The **residents who are impacted** are [a part of the field] but **are not at the table.**”*

*“We’re all community people – we bring that no matter where we’re sitting, **we can bring that community network** to the field.”*

*“**Our primary partners are the youth.** We don’t make choices about their lives without them.”*

Convener and Connector

Many grantees described their role within their fields as that of a convener

- Grantees are bringing partners together to advance work and make progress on shared goals
- As conveners, grantees are bringing together community members with partners and decision makers, elevating the voices of those most impacted by the issues grantees are addressing
- Grantees are also using their standing as a convener to connect community members with needed services and supports

*“We have a pretty strong presence in the community and we’re able to use that role to get feedback on what types of services people are struggling to access and...**we’re working with our community partners to make sure the community has access.**”*

*“A lot of the work that [our organization] does comes from **relationship-building, from 25 years of advocacy and coalition building** to build bridges and finding the like-minded in the community.”*

*“Our goal is to get people who are affected by the housing crisis involved in the conversation about how that crisis is solved - **ensuring that those people have a seat at the table.**”*



GRC Key Findings

Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

The Funds focuses on policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies as ways to make sustainable, lasting change within communities across Massachusetts. GRCs explored how receptive fields that grantees' work in are to PSE change strategies, PSE wins in those fields in the past year, and facilitators and barriers to further wins.

Community Connections & Capacity

Growing community-level capacity, leadership, and making connections between community and partners are key facilitators to PSE change

- Connections between and within communities facilitate change as people are able to share resources and responsibilities and by building strength in numbers
- Growing the capacity of communities, particularly around advocacy efforts, is also key to driving policy, systems, and environmental change

“It feels like, even though our county is rural, it comes with the ability to know person-to-person who is running an organization, knows how to get in touch with someone doing the thing you want to get in on.”

“We are all fighting the same battles and we have different abilities and resources. So why not team up?”

“You have to go and build capacity at the local level and make sure people are engaged and understand the legislative process...how to work with local leaders to make policy change.”

Silos and Differences Within Fields

Silos and differences in approach within fields make collaboration and sharing of resources difficult, hindering change from progressing

- Lack of shared strategy or collaboration hinders further PSE change and often leads organizations to feel like they are competing against each other for resources and support
- Funders and funding mechanisms also contribute to and reinforce the silos and separation within fields

*“We find ourselves competing with each other. **Is there a way to set a table and all come together?** It’s a yes – not an either/or...I don’t like it when legislators feel like they have to pick and choose between us.”*

*“No one is looking at systems and doing anything differently even with all the talk of social determinants of health. The **systems that fund and making funding decisions still do everything in silos.**”*

*“Everyone shares the same idea that everyone should have access to a home...The difference is in the strategies. **Sometimes there are tensions about which priorities should be moving forward.**”*

PSE Change Wins

Despite the hurdles, grantees named key policy, systems, and environmental change wins that have happened across fields but particularly around housing, mental health, and the justice system

- Grantees have been engaged in numerous policy changes related to housing at both the local and state level. These policy changes were wins in themselves and will also help facilitate further progress in the field
- Policy and systems changes within organizations and institutions, like schools, have also been key wins and important facilitators of work across these fields

*“[Short term rentals] became a legitimate business right before COVID.. But they have a really big effect on communities. **People are staying in AirBnBs and those used to be someone’s home.** [Buckland] just changed their zoning that they’re not allowed to have non-owner occupied housing in residential areas...Those [changes] were just approved by the AG and **now there’s a bunch of other towns that are interested in doing it.**”*

*“**Schools in particular are adopting policy changes** around more restorative justice, less emphasis on out of school suspensions and more on providing supports to children and families. I think there’s been a move and **I think it’s hopeful** – there’s been progress.”*



GRC Key Findings

Racial and Health Equity

The aim of the Funds is to increase racial and health equity across communities and systems in Massachusetts. The GRCs explored the current state of racial and health equity in the fields that they are working within. Grantees discussed the most important aspects of racial and health equity that need to be advanced within the field and the role that their organizations play in moving that work forward.

Community Engagement & Leadership

Community engagement activities, especially those that build community capacity and leadership, are important tools for advancing racial and health equity across the fields that grantees are working in

- Establishing advisory boards or steering committees made up of people most impacted by inequities is a strategy shared across many of the Funds' grantees
- Grantees also ensure that their processes are working toward the goal of equity through measures like compensating community members and ensuring language accessibility

*"There's no substitute for actual representation within an organization. There are some things that **when people aren't from the community, there are things that they're just not going to know, and this is obvious to the people in the community.**"*

*"For our steering committee, **we pay everyone.** Everyone gets paid \$15 for coming to the committee."*

*"A lot of our services have been curated to be in different languages... Trying to start from every resource being translatable. **Access is from the beginning, not just when it's requested.**"*

Building Collective Power

Working to build power within communities is key to the work many grantees are doing to advance health and racial equity

- Grantees are working to elevate the leadership of communities so that the people most impacted systemic challenges and barriers are the ones creating and leading the solutions
- Grantees are also thinking about their systems change work with a goal of creating systems that facilitates and centers community power. They are doing this by modeling powering within their own work and supporting partners to do the same

“The reality of what it means to be a tenant is not on the mind of decision makers. I think 80% of decision makers are homeowners. **The reality of what folks are facing is not part of the equation.** It would shift the center of the conversation [to have tenants in decision-making spaces].”

“It takes time to build this into the structure so we’re also doing work with partners about learning communities, representation in their groups, and helping them make spaces like this in their structures. **We’re making sure it’s not just our committees and that it’s being embedded into community and our partners.**”

Addressing Systemic Barriers

Grantees are working to advance racial and health equity in their communities by addressing systemic and structural barriers that make it difficult for people to access services and resources

- Communication is an important tool for addressing these barriers both to raise awareness about available supports but also to learn from communities what makes access difficult
- Addressing these systemic barriers often involves tailoring solutions to the unique needs of communities

*“I was looking at our data on who comes to us with discrimination complaints, and **we don’t have a lot of LGBTQ folks coming and it’s not because they’re not getting discriminated against**, so we’ve been looking at how to expand outreach.”*

*“The thing our CHIP has realized recently is that some people just aren’t going to get to a bus, **so we have a new “safe access to driving” initiative which works on access to cars or a license** or how do you address those issues when not everyone has the income or speaks English.”*



GRC Key Findings

Community Engagement

Community engagement is central to the work of the Funds and a key expectation of grantees across funding streams and cohorts. The importance of the roles that communities play in the work – as leaders, stakeholders, partners, and more – emerged as a theme across GRCs.

Grantees also discussed the strategies that they use to facilitate and sustain meaningful and authentic community engagement.

Meeting People Where They Are

In addition to working with communities to lead work, grantees emphasized the importance of community members also directing where, when, and how they are involved

- For many communities, meeting people where they are at is literal – going out to community spaces where people are already gathering
- Grantees also emphasized that bringing services to community members is an important tool for getting people engaged in their work

*“To the outreach piece, **showing up is the most important thing that we do. We go to people, we don’t expect them to come to us...** That was one of the biggest changes when we started [our initiative], we tried having people come to us for planning but we got crickets so we started going to them and we got so much engagement.”*

*“One of the reasons we brought in clinical and mental health experts – the schools and police department and municipalities were doing that, but what we found was that... young people wouldn’t be honest if they were in an authoritarian setting – they just wouldn’t be comfortable... **Here – the place you play music or basketball is the same place you get counseling. It opened the floodgates.**”*

Storytelling

Elevating community member's stories as part of PSE change is an important tool for moving the work forward while centering lived experiences

- Grantees described storytelling as a key tool for growing their movements and building wider bases of support for their work
- Grantees emphasized the importance of doing storytelling work with communities intentionally and ensuring that the work isn't extractive or exploitative of people's voice

"Combining stories and data is a powerful way for people to "get it." A lot of the people we serve don't have insurance for preventive health care and legislators/others don't understand this... We shared a story about a woman who we were able to privately screen for cancer, she had stage three cancer, and now she can access coverage."

"You just have to make sure that you're never requiring someone or pressuring someone to share their story. There are just some people who don't want to share and some who take great pride in sharing their story... You also have to be careful about when and where you're doing it."

Sustaining Community Engagement

Sustaining community engagement and leadership, whether due to issues of recruitment, distrust, or community fatigue was a challenge across grantees

- Recruiting and retaining community is a challenge due to the long timeframes of projects and the busy lives of community members
- Building trust, especially with politically and socially vulnerable communities, takes time, intentionality, and is an ongoing process
- Many communities are fatigued by frequent data collection efforts that don't lead to tangible changes or improvements in their lives

*"A lot of people don't have the time. Even with the addition of stipends, **it's been difficult finding people interested in doing the work.**"*

*"A lot of what I hear from families is that **I go to focus groups, people ask me my ideas but there is a fatigue because nothing really changes for them.** I think it's because those who are truly making PSE change – they don't have lived experience and they're biased...Lately I've heard 'If I get one more survey, I'm tired of getting asked.' Which I think is very real."*



GRC Key Findings

Lessons for Funders

Grantees were asked what role they'd like to see funders, including the Funds itself, play within their fields of work. These conversations explored the need for additional supports and resources; and then expanded into what Funders could do to move the field beyond a grant cycle to grant cycle model and support sustainability.

What Funders Aren't Funding

A key challenge in identifying and obtaining funding for PSE change work is that what organizations need often doesn't match with what funders support

- Relationship building and community engagement are key facilitators in PSE change work but are often not funded. Grantees emphasized the need for more funders to provide support for these activities
- Organizations and fields also benefit from funders supporting operation and capital costs. However, grantees shared that funders rarely fund these costs, despite that type of funding being particularly impactful on the sustainability of organization's work

*"One of the big frustrations is the emphasis placed on community engagement [by funders] and **when you look at restrictions, it's like do you want me to do this or what?** It restricts what you can do with community residents."*

*"I think a lot of stuff [the Funds does] is the sort of things I think more funders should do – being more focused on outcomes and letting us draw the map on how we get to the outcome – **let us do what we need to do.**"*

Funding Approaches

Grantees would like to see funders revisit the approaches they use when deciding what and who to fund

- Grantees would like to see funders make intentional efforts to diversify who they are funding by revisiting their requirements and seeking to do more funding in rural and less populated areas
- Ideally, grantees want to see funders practice trust-based philanthropy and let organizations and communities drive the direction of the work

*“Let us draw the map on how we get to the outcome, let us do what we need to do and not focus so much on ‘this is what you said you would do and now you need to do it to the letter for the next 5-years.’ **Let us draw the map and not be prescriptive on how to get there.**”*

*“The work is expensive and takes a lot of staff time and on the ground mobility and **you can't unlock that money without these crazy restrictions and thousands and thousands of people get left behind** because of it.”*

*“When you have a town that only has 15 people that needs a service, you're not going to find anyone to fund it because **people want to see numbers.**”*



Conclusions

Conclusions

Projects supported by the Funds are **creating new processes and programs. They are working to overhaul existing structures to create systems which center people with lived experience and facilitate them using their power** to improve their communities. When approaching systems change work, grantees describe the systems themselves as some of the biggest barriers they face, as often, the systems are working exactly the way they were intended.

Grantees **championed successful efforts to change policy**, especially housing related policies, at the state and local levels and **implemented systems change within their organizations, their partners, and institutions** like schools.

There are **opportunities for the funding and philanthropy fields to act more strategically to support the ongoing sustainability** of the work they support by making long-term commitments and intentionally distributing funds to advance PSE change and facilitate collaboration across fields.

Contact machhafunds@hria.org for more information.