



VENTURES

# King County Case Study

## About This Case Study

These case studies were authored as a part of the evaluation of ReThink Health Ventures, a three-year project of The Rippel Foundation, conducted with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to explore what could accelerate the progress of ambitious multisector partnerships working to transform health in their regions, and what often stands in the way of that progress. Through the project, Rippel's ReThink Health initiative supported multisector partnerships in six regions across the country as they worked to build practices that are essential for transforming a regional health ecosystem, including broad stewardship, sound strategy, sustainable financing, and a shared vision. Each participating partnership selected a handful of members to participate on the Ventures Team for their region. Those teams collaborated with ReThink Health and their broader partnerships throughout the project. Mount Auburn Associates served as the project's learning and evaluation partners.

We have authored case studies about each of the six partnerships to highlight their unique journeys toward health transformation, with a particular focus on their work in Ventures, as well as insights that can be applicable to a wide range of stewards working to transform regional health ecosystems across the United States. You can find the other case studies, along with a detailed evaluation report about ReThink Health Ventures, at [www.rethinkhealth.org/ventures](http://www.rethinkhealth.org/ventures).

We are grateful for the time and energy that so many people contributed to support the development of these case studies. Most importantly, the authors would like to thank the leaders who participated in Ventures for their tireless dedication to transforming health and well-being in their communities.

# King County Case Study

## King County, WA

By Beth Siegel (Mt. Auburn Associates) and Jane Erickson (ReThink Health)

### Overview

King County, Washington, has a deep tradition of regional improvement initiatives, from community development, school readiness, homelessness, and behavioral health to economic development, climate mitigation, and workforce and transit-oriented development. In addition, there are explicit public-sector strategic plans focused on social justice, equity, and race in both the city of Seattle and in King County. Many leaders in the region understand that addressing health must go beyond innovations in health care delivery to tackle not only the symptoms but also the root causes of health inequities.

Building on this very strong foundation, a network of multisector leaders, convened as part of the ReThink Health Ventures project, decided that aligning multiple initiatives around a common vision would not be enough to get to the type of transformational work necessary to achieve truly equitable health and well-being. As noted by one of the participants, “We realized that if we are really trying to get to greater equity, we needed a different game plan. We needed a different approach to really creating a collective effort that is leveraging the strengths in various sectors towards a common outcome.”

Seattle Foundation’s Civic Commons project recently launched You Belong Here, an initiative that embodies this new game plan. The initiative will help people and organizations interested in learning how to build a sense of widely shared ownership for a region’s future and inspire businesses as well as residents, particularly those often left out, to help steer the course toward more equitable outcomes.

### Context

The economic and institutional contexts within King County shaped how the network of multisector leaders approached its work with Ventures. Growing economic disparities and fears that the county would soon be unaffordable to many existing residents drove the group’s vision. And, the region’s history of strong and successful cross-sector partnerships between the public sector and philanthropy, many of which were rooted in a commitment to transformation, was fundamental to the overall strategy that the group embraced.

**Community Context:** King County has experienced enormous demographic and economic changes over the past three decades. Over the last 15 years, the

#### VENTURES TEAM, GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

- **Ventures Team:** Leaders from major local and national philanthropies, the office of the county executive, the city of Seattle’s office of planning and community development, the King County accountable community for health (HealthierHere), and the county public health department
- **Geographic Scope:** King County

[www.seattlefoundation.org/Blog/Articles/2018/05/civic-commons-announcement](http://www.seattlefoundation.org/Blog/Articles/2018/05/civic-commons-announcement)

county has shifted to a growing technology-based economy, evolving from a mature manufacturing economy known primarily as the home of Boeing aircraft plants. It is now home to two of the largest global technology companies, Microsoft and Amazon, as well as an expanding tech sector. One result of this economic shift has been significant population growth, which has put pressure on the housing market.

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While, in general, residents of King County are doing well economically, there are growing disparities in terms of both specific population groups and communities within the county. The disparities existed prior to—and have been exacerbated by—the recent growth of the region. The overall median income is higher than the national average at \$83,571, but the median household income for black residents is only \$42,280 and for Hispanic residents about \$57,933.<sup>1</sup> There are also neighborhoods within Seattle and communities within King County that are facing serious economic challenges. The [2015-2016 Community Health Needs Assessment](#) found, for example, tremendous geographic disparities in percentages of

1 Source: [www.PolicyMap.com](http://www.PolicyMap.com)

children enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch programs, with school districts ranging from a low of four percent to a high of 79 percent of students enrolled.

**Political and Institutional Context:** Both King County and the city of Seattle have progressive governments that have had a long-standing and deep commitment to pursuing health equity and to designing innovative, system-level solutions that consider both urgent services (like acute care of illness or injury) and vital conditions that help residents of a community to be healthy and well (such as education, humane housing, and others).

**Establishment of HealthierHere, the regional ACH:** Two federal State Innovation Models (SIM) awards advanced Washington's approach to health system transformation, which is known as the Healthier Washington Plan. In 2013, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) awarded the state nearly \$1 million to develop the five-year plan. The state then received a second \$65 million planning grant to identify five foundational areas to achieve health system transformation. A critical component of this plan was the establishment of regional accountable communities for health (ACHs), which will be held accountable for performance results and rapid-cycle learning and improvement. At the same time that the state was developing the plans for the ACH implementation, it was negotiating with the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) on a five-year Medicaid demonstration waiver. This agreement, reached in 2017, provides up to \$1.1 billion in incentives for delivery system reform. The regional ACHs were then tasked with pursuing projects aimed at transforming the Medicaid delivery system in the state.<sup>2</sup>

Since King County had already convened, in 2013, a regional multisector group for the Healthier Washington Transformation Plan, it was able to use this group to form an Interim Leadership Council as the platform for the new ACH in the region. When the state decided that the newly formed ACHs would be the regional entities responsible for the 1115 Medicaid waiver, as part of the state's negotiation with CMS, they decided that the ACHs could not be governmental or quasi-governmental entities. As a result, in April 2017, the Interim Leadership Council spun off as a separate entity, an ACH called HealthierHere, with a 26-member board of directors and with the fiscal sponsorship of Seattle Foundation. As of February

2019, HealthierHere was in the implementation phase and had begun contracting with providers to transform the delivery system.

## Advancing Health Transformation with ReThink Health Ventures

The King County Ventures team of regional leaders began with a focus on the ACH, but quickly shifted to focus on better aligning and creating greater synergy among the more than two dozen local initiatives that could impact health and well-being. Through their work with ReThink Health's [Negotiating a Well-Being Portfolio Exercise](#) during the spring and summer of 2017, team members saw how the county's diverse initiatives fit together as a system influencing health. As one team member noted, "We [started out] thinking that the ACH was at the center of our work. [But from our work to understand the dynamics of well-being in King County we realized] that it was a spoke in the wheel, but not the center."

In May 2017, with this revised focus and with the assistance of Ventures coaches, the team convened an invitation-only meeting with 35 individuals representing the most ambitious transformation initiatives currently underway across the county. While the convening surfaced some lack of alignment and the siloed nature of the work, it did not achieve the intended result of energizing the assembled group to take further action together. During the debrief after the meeting, the King County team and the Ventures coaches identified a bigger issue; the team realized that what was really missing was the sense of belonging and "civic muscle" needed to enact changes that are truly inclusive and transformative.

As a result, the King County team turned its attention to developing a value proposition narrative rooted in a shared vision for King County's future as well as shared values around what it would take to get there. This effort was instrumental in galvanizing a widening network of leaders around a deep-seated concern about the future prospects for the people and place they loved. In thinking about their vision for the future, team members realized that a deeper systemic response to the rapid changes occurring in the King County region would require much broader involvement of people and organizations, especially long-time residents, corporate executives, and newcomers in the millennial workforce. The team concluded that it was not enough to launch and lead dozens of major initiatives; residents in King County must begin to think and act like stewards of their common region. The team identified two pivotal elements needed for that kind of system stewardship: 1) creating a new leadership ethos, and 2) strengthening the civic infrastructure by creating conditions in which

2 Washington State Health Care Authority, Policy Division. (January 1, 2018). State Health Care Innovation Plan Annual Status Report, Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2572, Chapter 223, Laws of 2014. Retrieved from [https://app.leg.wa.gov/ReportsToTheLegislature/Home/GetPDF?fileName=HCA\\_Report\\_-\\_State\\_Health\\_Care\\_Innovation\\_Plan\\_79836ce7-372d-4c40-904a-b7f472c32d5d.pdf](https://app.leg.wa.gov/ReportsToTheLegislature/Home/GetPDF?fileName=HCA_Report_-_State_Health_Care_Innovation_Plan_79836ce7-372d-4c40-904a-b7f472c32d5d.pdf)

residents have the opportunity to belong and contribute to realization of the shared vision.

The two philanthropic leaders on the team embraced this new focus. They saw a major gap in the region in terms of power sharing and wanted leaders to recognize this and learn to navigate in a much more equitable way. The team developed the idea of a new effort, You Belong Here, which one team member described as creating “the type of connective tissue in the region where we recognize that continuing to have the type of region that we all want to live, work, and play in requires us to engage with each other in a different way.” The essential theme of You Belong Here also resonated strongly with elected officials who wanted to reinforce King County’s commitment to inclusion and prosperity for all. For example, King County Executive Dow Constantine repeated the phrase “you belong here” several times in his 2017 State of the County address. It was also a central theme in his re-election campaign, and the county has embraced it as an official governing philosophy.

With a longer-term time horizon and a much more ambitious goal, the Ventures team sought multi-year philanthropic support for its work. The involvement and excitement of the two philanthropic leaders on the team was critical to this. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation eventually provided seed funding to support the work; and Michael Brown, who had been Seattle Foundation’s vice president for programs, became the “civic architect” of the foundation’s new special project, the Civic Commons. You Belong Here became one of the Civic Commons’ first initiatives.

You Belong Here’s efforts to strengthen belonging and civic muscle could have many benefits in the region. Most importantly, the work is necessary to ensure full inclusion and address racism, sexism, and economic inequity. In addition, it will contribute directly to people’s health and well-being by strengthening social supports, and indirectly by developing a constituency that will enact new policies, programs, or investment priorities.

### **How leaders are working differently**

- 1. Playing the long game:** While recognizing the need to address some of the more urgent needs in the region, the leaders involved in Ventures are now taking a very long-term approach and realize that changing power dynamics and developing a more inclusive agenda for regional transformation is a multi-decade effort.
- 2. Expanding ambitions:** The team’s enhanced focus on root causes and system transformation expands regional leaders’ already noteworthy ambitions. They already had an ambitious vision and strong foundation of work on health and equity, and

they have been able to build from there.

- 3. Addressing power dynamics head on:** The regional leaders’ goal of catalyzing community members as a means to achieving equitable outcomes has the potential of ensuring that the community looks at things differently, partners in new ways, and shares power in a different way.
- 4. Embracing a systems approach:** The leaders involved in Ventures are challenging a traditional regional culture that tended to be top down and employ technical solutions. Their work in Ventures has reinforced the belief that top down technical solutions particularly those driven by the region’s large for-profit corporations, are failing the county, and that a systems approach, supported by a commitment to strengthening civic muscle, could provide a more sustainable path forward.

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### **Learning from King County**

You Belong Here and the other work that the King County leaders’ involvement in Ventures catalyzed is still in a formative stage. The core stakeholders involved are in the process of defining their direction over the next three years. Whatever the outcome, however, the leaders’ new way of working and thinking is likely to impact how the region addresses its changing demographics and economic trajectory in a way that is more systemic, inclusive, and benefits all of its residents. The experience in King County offers lessons for other regions about the ways that progress toward health transformation can be advanced or derailed.

### **Ways to advance progress**

**Responding to widely shared sense of urgency:** The rapid changes in the King County region, with growing homelessness and fears of further gentrification, have created a concern that if Seattle does not address the current trends, it could become

the next San Francisco—a community where many low-income residents are finding themselves displaced and where residents fear the soul of the community is threatened. Through its Ventures work, the team harnessed this sense of urgency into an emerging regional movement to build civic muscle.

**Mapping existing initiatives:** There are, according to the Ventures team, over 20 initiatives in the King County region that are focusing on some type of collaborative process to address homelessness, health inequities, educational inequities, and so on. Through Ventures, the team mapped out these initiatives to better understand where initiatives aligned and where they did not, and then assessed how to reach scale. Before this, there was no alignment across these initiatives, and there was a sense that the primary focus of each initiative was to address symptoms of these problems, not the underlying drivers, such as income inequality and structural racism.

**Developing a shared value proposition narrative:** For some members of the Ventures team, the hard work to develop a value proposition narrative around their shared purpose and their unique ability to contribute to the achievement of that purpose was critical to their coming to the realization that they needed to focus on developing people's and organizations' civic muscle, which would include disrupting some of the current power dynamics in the region. Building a compelling narrative was also important in initial efforts to effectively communicate and broaden the core team.

**Explicitly connecting urgent services and vital conditions:** It was important that the executive director of the region's new ACH was part of the Ventures team, connecting the ambitious work around building civic muscle with the more grounded work around transforming the health system. While HealthierHere was initially responsible for implementing the 1115 Medicaid waiver, its vision extends beyond the Medicaid population. How this effort evolves will be an important test of You Belong Here's initial focus.

**Building a team of “super connectors”:** The King County team was not a formal cross-sector partnership established prior to Ventures. Instead, it was a group of well-respected leaders, both within their organizations and the community more broadly, who had worked in many different environments within the region and were deeply committed to the shared vision they created. As a result, when it came to keeping the work moving forward, their organizational affiliations remained important, but less so than their personal connections and mutual respect. As one team member reported, “We didn't have to bring our

organizations along with us because we had the relationships within those organizations to know that we could pull resources as needed and we had so many connections in our community that we could tap.”

### *Ways that progress can be derailed*

**Navigating the tension between concrete action and longer-term system approaches:** The greatest tension in the work over the course of Ventures has been between those who think it is critical to achieve some early wins through concrete actions and those who are more comfortable playing the long game. It is difficult to step back and have a long-term systems approach in a community that believes there are many urgent needs that are not being addressed. Regionally, there is a bias toward taking action, so stepping back and listening to and engaging folks in new ways is an ongoing challenge.

**Communicating what they are trying to do:** The team shared that communicating its value proposition narrative and theory of system change in a way that is understandable across multiple sectors and stakeholder groups has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. To sustain progress, team members will likely need to continue refining their narrative with their key audiences as a way to substantively engage with them around building civic muscle in King County.

**Working with the not usual suspects:** To achieve broad-based and long-term transformation, the team will need to extend engagement beyond those in the region who have long been involved, like the public sector and philanthropic leaders. Their focus on involving business leaders, young people, and residents more broadly is critical to this strategy.

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[ThinkWithUs@rethinkhealth.org](mailto:ThinkWithUs@rethinkhealth.org)



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