

# Healthy Huntington

An **Engaged Cities Award** case study. Created by Cities of Service in partnership with 2018 award finalist Huntington, West Virginia.

## Executive Summary

Huntington, West Virginia, had the unenviable title of “unhealthiest city in America,” with an obesity rate of 49 percent. The mayor believed that real change had to come from the community, so he focused on empowering residents to create long-lasting initiatives. City hall functioned as a facilitator — encouraging community ideas and providing space, funding, and resources to groups that were committed to getting people involved and improving Huntington. As a result, citizen-led initiatives like bike trails, farmers markets, cooking classes, and 5Ks have become the norm, helping Huntington to significantly lower its obesity rate and build a stronger, more resilient community.



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## The Challenge

Huntington, West Virginia sits on the Ohio River, near the point where Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia meet. For decades, its location helped make it a prime manufacturing hub and a key location for transporting coal. In 1950, Huntington had a population of approximately 86,000 people. But as the coal sector modernized and manufacturing shifted, jobs started disappearing.

By 2010, the population was under 50,000, abandoned housing and crime had become a primary community concern, and health problems abounded. To make matters worse, the opioid epidemic would soon hit Huntington particularly hard.

Huntington's population is predominantly white (86.3 percent), with a median family income of \$29,800. Marshall University, St. Mary's Medical Center, and Cabell Huntington Hospital are among the city's largest employers, but despite the booming healthcare sector, 30.8 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

With economic opportunities hard to come by, depression and chronic health issues were widespread. In 2008, the Associated Press, using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, named Huntington the "fattest and unhealthiest city" in the United States. The region had the highest obesity rate in the country — 49 percent — along with the highest rates for diabetes and heart disease.

On top of that, in 2010, season one of "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution" focused on Huntington's unhealthy eating habits. "The national media's portrayal of Huntington residents and leaders as stubborn, skeptical, and unwilling to change added insult to injury," as Huntington city leaders wrote in their application for the Engaged Cities Award. This spotlight on the city's unhealthiness spurred both City Hall and residents to take action. They didn't want Huntington to be defined by negative statistics and believed the city had much more to offer.



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## The Solution

In 2012, Huntington elected a new mayor, Steve Williams, who would soon be diagnosed with diabetes and understood firsthand many of the health challenges that residents faced. Shortly after Mayor Williams took office, he and his team came up with a plan to raise awareness of

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health issues and encourage people to be more active. Their approach encompassed a range of initiatives, such as working with Cabell County Schools to improve school lunches, increasing access to healthy food, and building running trails and hosting walks with the mayor.

Huntington was able to tap into a number of underutilized resources, including the city's flat topography and the Ohio River, the local university, and the hospitals. This not only helped them scale up programs more quickly, it also gave citizens a sense of pride in their community.

Crucially, the city reached out to citizens and community groups to run many of these initiatives. This approach instilled a sense of ownership among residents from the beginning and helped engage more people who might not otherwise have been involved. It also allowed the city to act in a supportive role for a broader array of new initiatives. The mayor's office was open to ideas ranging from a farmers market to meetups, and saw itself as a coordinator for whatever the particular need was, whether groups needed space, funding, or a jolt of energy.

"The community groups bring the ideas and we work with them to facilitate," said city Communications Director Bryan Chambers. "We don't act as an obstacle — we try to do everything we can to empower them. The momentum truly begins with a lot of these neighborhood groups."

Most importantly, city leaders knew that their job was to encourage and support these initiatives. When motivation was lacking or groups didn't get a big win, city officials made it a point to provide encouragement and connections that kept many of the programs alive.

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**BRYAN CHAMBERS, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR**

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## **Nuts and Bolts: How it Works**

### ***Create Huntington***

When Mayor Williams took office, there were already efforts underway to improve the city's health and boost community engagement. Create Huntington, a grassroots organization focused on civic engagement, grew out of a direct relationship with the office of Mayor David Felinton, who had served the city until 2008.

"The mayor at the time saw a need for an organization to rise up and help spur the change that we were looking for in Huntington," said Bill Rosenberger, Create Huntington's current president.

Specifically, City Manager Cathy Burns said the previous mayor wanted to encourage more participation in economic development. He sent a group to visit several cities — Paducah, Kentucky; Oxford and Tupelo, Mississippi; and Chattanooga, Tennessee — which he identified as having innovative and collaborative solutions to local challenges.

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When the group came back, the mayor funded a study that provided the framework for how to set goals for Create Huntington and organize its structure. Create Huntington officially launched in 2009.

For the first seven years of Create Huntington, one of its most successful programs was a weekly Chat-n-Chew, where people came together to eat, discuss issues in their community, and brainstorm solutions. It was such a vibrant environment, Rosenberger said, that members of city council attended, as did reporters. The goal was to help connect people with similar passions and ideas, providing support as they created new programs and initiatives to help the city.

Connecting and supporting community projects is the driving force behind Create Huntington, Rosenberger said, and is visible in the matching micro-grants that it gives out as well. At less than \$500, it's not earth-shattering money, but is often just enough to get community-focused projects off the ground. The grants have helped fund everything from dog parks and pop-up shops to wrestling mats for free taekwondo classes.

"What we've tried to do is give people that power, outreach and connection," said Rosenberger, who served on city council for several years before joining Create Huntington's board. "We want to connect people to others who can help bring their ideas to life. If we do it for you, you're never going to feel as invested as if you have a hand in it."

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**BILL ROSENBERGER, PRESIDENT OF CREATE HUNTINGTON**

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The group functions independently of City Hall, but the close relationship remains. In fact, Chambers recently joined Create Huntington on its Board of Connectors. Rosenberger said his presence will help amplify the group's work and provide "more of a voice" for its initiatives. Create Huntington's model of empowering citizens to launch their own projects mirrors how the city approaches civic engagement. "We don't need to reinvent community service, we just need to help the people who are already doing stuff," said Rosenberger.

This tactic has borne fruit, particularly the Chat-n-Chews, which helped launch the Rails and Ales craft beer festival, the River and Rail Bakery, and, most significantly, The Wild Ramp Farmers Market.

### ***The Wild Ramp Farmers Market***

Residents wanted to bring more fresh produce to Huntington and started talking about how to make that happen. Inspired by the abundance of farmland and aware of the lack of access, three Marshall University students turned it into their thesis project. In partnership with Create Huntington and local startup incubator Unlimited Future, the students looked at Huntington's access to local produce and healthy food options.



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Lauren Kemp was one of the students involved from the beginning. She said once their project started to gain steam, the community wanted to be involved. They raised about \$10,000 in mostly small-dollar donations — “just people in the community handing us checks.” In 2012, that enabled them to open The Wild Ramp, a hybrid farmers market and grocery store that, in addition to fruits and vegetables, sells everything from cheese and meat to beer and salsa — all produced within a 250-mile radius.

“[Having a variety of products] was part of our goal,” Kemp said. “If people are going to skip the grocery store, we wanted to capture as much of their dinner plate as possible. So we act like a grocery store, but at our core, we’re a farmers market.”

The city has played a critical role in The Wild Ramp’s success. A year into The Wild Ramp’s existence, Mayor Williams’ staff orchestrated a deal to provide a larger and more permanent facility. The Wild Ramp now leases a building from the city for \$1 a year in West Huntington, an area that previously had few healthy options for residents. This initiative is a clear example of success for the city’s model of citizen engagement: partnering with the community to provide a crucial resource (space) and letting the people involved on the ground determine exactly what is most needed and what the final product would look like.

The market’s location is particularly significant since it’s in a distressed neighborhood. Kemp said this has helped spur economic development and bring in more foot traffic. Healthy food demonstrations and programs for kids have brought more opportunities to the area. In particular, she added, a public square across the street has become more lively since The Wild Ramp was established.

And the community has stayed involved with The Wild Ramp: Kemp said there are 37 volunteers who work regular shifts at the market. The Wild Ramp has also created more than 40 paid jobs, expanded eight other fresh food markets, benefited 145 local farmers, and provided healthy food to a population that previously had few options.



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### ***Huntington High Wellness Academy***

When Mayor Williams came into office, he wanted to double down on the city’s health-related efforts. One of his main priorities was to engage the city’s youth. He reached out to physical education teachers at Huntington High School to get them on board with his vision.

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## ENGAGED CITIES AWARD CASE STUDY

“They took the idea and ran with it,” said Burns. In 2014, Huntington High School launched a Wellness Academy that focused on a holistic approach to health — everything from physical and nutritional to spiritual and financial health. The program included classes that help prepare students for careers in health-related fields, a school-based fruit and vegetable garden, and an increased focus on physical activity. Mayor Williams’ staff also helped the high school apply for, and win, a \$25,000 grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors to fight childhood obesity. The money helped the Wellness Academy expand to Huntington’s middle and elementary schools.

### ***A New Focus on Running***

The focus on athletics was also visible in the explosion of races and runs in Huntington — the city hosted more than 83 over two years. “We had probably six years in a row where there was a 5K every weekend from April to October,” said Rosenberger.

Burns said this was due to both City Hall and Huntington’s residents. “The city did a great job marketing the race routes and providing support with police and public works. And, organically, groups discovered the city is well-designed to host races, with relatively flat land and lots of green space, and various race groups organized to promote and properly time races.”



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### ***People Powered Huntington***

As part of the overall health improvement efforts, Huntington City Planner Breanna Shell wanted to make the city more bike friendly. So, in 2014, she and other community members teamed up to create the Huntington Commuter Bike Map Project. It designated the safest bike routes in the city, using indicators like newly installed bike lanes, roads that had less traffic, and bike rack locations.

That project served as a precursor to People Powered Huntington (PPH), an advocacy group for bikers and pedestrians that Shell launched in 2016. Like many other initiatives in Huntington, PPH launched out of a Chat-n-Chew. Shell said they used Create Huntington’s Facebook group to bring interested people together, and then they held a Chat-n-Chew focused on biking and walking in Huntington. A few early strategic meetups helped them establish the vision, mission, and goals, which go beyond improving roads and bike paths to getting people more comfortable with walking and biking around the city.

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“We have a really strong exercise-driven, hard-core cyclist culture in Huntington,” Shell said. “But I’m really interested in bridging the gaps — understanding who the commuting population is and who is using bikes and walking as their main form of transportation because that’s the only form they have. That’s the goal of bringing together the coalition.”

Shell is in a unique position, given that she works on many of these projects in her personal time, but also “never really takes off that city hat.” She said Chambers has also been an advocate for cycling in Huntington and his work has straddled the line between personal and professional commitment.

“A lot of things overlap with my day-to-day job, but they’re not really in my job description,” Shell said. “It’s hard to not be the voice of the city when you’re intimately involved in some of the things and people say, ‘The city should do blank blank blank.’”

In the future, Shell hopes to use her position to establish a more formal advisory council on issues impacting bikes and pedestrians. She said PPH was created so that “everyone is involved in any way they can be,” but ultimately, she’d like a group that can advise the city and report to the mayor.

Shell and Chambers are good reminders that city employees are also community members. Letting these two roles inform each other can help create a bigger impact. Personal passions for things like nutrition, fitness, and civic engagement can help bring projects to scale much more quickly when people are able to tap into the city’s resources. In Huntington, Shell’s role has helped People Powered Huntington promote meetups, walking tours, trail cleanups and frequent bike rides through Huntington and along the Paul Ambrose Health Trail (PATH), named for a young doctor from Huntington who was committed to fighting obesity and was killed in the September 11 terrorist attacks. The 26-mile trail was designed to connect schools, parks, and major neighborhoods of the city, and is deeply supported by the community.

### ***Walks with the Mayor***

Many of Huntington’s early efforts focused on improving access to healthy food and increasing exercise. These were part of a more holistic goal to deepen community engagement, improve mental health, and increase economic opportunities. In 2015, Mayor Williams launched “Walks with the Mayor,” which Chambers said has been “one of the best things to happen to our community.”

The idea was to encourage residents to get active while also giving them a forum to raise concerns. Mayor Williams and other community leaders — the police chief, fire chief, public works director, and members of the sanitary board — went to each of the nine city council districts and walked through the neighborhood with residents. Residents pointed out potholes, broken signs, blighted properties, and drug activity.

“We’d walk along [and] somebody would come up and point out just what was on their mind, and then they would fall back and someone else would settle in,” said Mayor Williams, calling it “amazing.”

The walks didn’t stop once each district had been visited. The mayor said he had hosted more than 50 walks and city continues to schedule more.

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As a result of the walks, “there are numerous examples of drug houses that were busted, vacant houses that were boarded up, potholes that were filled, sidewalks that were repaired ... and the list goes on and on,” Chambers said. “It’s things that may seem small to someone across town, but mean everything in the world to the person living in that neighborhood.”

### **Huntington’s Kitchen**

Even though many residents were upset by Jamie Oliver’s portrayal of their town, his presence had a lasting positive impact. During the show’s filming, a downtown building was established as “Jamie’s Kitchen.” After production ended, Cabell Huntington Hospital took over the space, offering hundreds of healthy-cooking classes to residents. Huntington’s Kitchen is still thriving today as a partnership between Cabell Huntington Hospital and Marshall University. It is also one of many productive partnerships for the city: firefighters and other first responders recently started taking classes at the kitchen.

“We want our employees to eat healthier, have healthier options, experiment with different types of food and vegetables,” said Burns. “The kitchen provided a nice outlet to do that.”

Additionally, Burns said the space functions as a central meeting spot for many city-sponsored events, from health walks to Christmas parades to downtown business crawls. “It’s a great gathering place,” Burns said. “[And it’s a way to let] people know what services are available and get them in the front door.”

### **Keys to Success**

The efforts in Huntington — both in City Hall and through community organizations — have started to pay off. The obesity rate dropped by nearly 15 percent and the city has reduced healthcare costs.



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The mayor’s coordinated approach to improving health and engaging the community has had a positive impact in other areas, particularly opioid usage in the city. In November 2014, Mayor Williams created a local Office of Drug Control Policy, which gathered and analyzed the data around opioid usage and then connected with more than 50 local agencies and organizations to facilitate solutions. They’re optimistic about this coordinated strategy: The overdose rate



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in Cabell County dropped 41 percent in the first seven months of 2018 compared to 2017, according to overdose response calls by Cabell County EMS.

“It became apparent very quickly that we had a lot of assets and resources,” Chambers said. “But sometimes the left hand didn’t know what right hand was doing, and it was hard to identify gaps in service.” Through its relationships with community groups and other local organizations, the city was able to better coordinate services.

One of the major themes of Huntington’s transformation has been to “work with the assets that you have,” according to Burns. She referenced the earthen flood wall along the Ohio River in Huntington’s West End — it was necessary to keep the water out, but had become a barrier to people enjoying the natural resources. So when they built that portion of the PATH, they utilized the existing earthen levee by building the trail on top of it.

Similarly, Rosenberger said that existing institutions like Marshall University are a huge asset to the city, and he’s advocated for keeping graduates in Huntington by appealing to their sense of community.

But even as Huntington has made remarkable strides toward health and wellness, there are still obstacles the city has to overcome. Burns notes that while the city’s approach of empowering citizens and community groups has been incredibly successful, it’s also time-consuming.

“It’s effective because people take ownership in their surroundings and the projects they’ve been involved with,” Burns said. “But people come and go. People get involved and stay engaged for a while and then they move on, they move, they lose interest. So it does take energy — the city has to lead the effort and continually engage and get people excited about the vision.”

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**CATHY BURNS, CITY MANAGER**

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Burns said keeping citizens engaged and active requires a lot of intentional effort on the part of the city.

“You want to make sure you recognize people and reward them for their efforts,” she said. “But you also have to have a cheerleader, someone who’s constantly pushing and encouraging. And then you have to have results, successes, and things you can celebrate.”

The mayor’s story of personal transformation — which was itself spurred by residents — has also played an important role. During a visit to the student center at Marshall University, the students invited him to get his blood sugar checked at the free screening they were hosting. It was very high. This realization spurred the mayor to lose 65 pounds. His story resonated with community members who were striving to get healthy.

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In Huntington, the encouragement hasn't only come from the mayor. It was also the police department and the development office, which was critical in helping to revitalize neighborhoods and improve city streets. Burns said it was important to get other departments on board, since many of them are staffed by civil servants who aren't dependent on re-election. These people are crucial to the continuity of the city's relationship with the community.

Shell said the relatively small size of Huntington also means there is flexibility to innovate and experiment with new approaches, and the city itself has been "a good partner in being open to things and trying out new things."

"We've learned [that] when you collaborate, it will lead to partnerships. And that's what started happening," said Mayor Williams. "People began to bring us ideas."

Huntington's success has demonstrated that when leaders are open to the ideas of citizens and community groups, city government can foster relationships and facilitate initiatives that transform the city.

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## ENGAGED CITIES AWARD CASE STUDY

**Cities of Service** is an independent nonprofit organization that helps mayors and city leaders tap the knowledge, creativity, and service of citizens to solve public problems and create vibrant cities. We work with cities to build city-led, citizen-powered initiatives that target specific needs, achieve long-term and measurable outcomes, improve the quality of life for residents, and build stronger cities. Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of more than 250 cities, representing more than 73 million people across the Americas and Europe.



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### THE ENGAGED CITIES AWARD

The Cities of Service Engaged Cities Award shines a light on cities that are collaborating with citizens to meet pressing local challenges in diverse and creative ways. Huntington, West Virginia was one of ten finalists for the inaugural Engaged Cities Award in 2018.

Each year, Cities of Service recognizes cities that are effectively involving their citizens to do things like reduce community violence,

produce better budgets, create safer streets, and build stronger communities. The strategies of the Engaged Cities Award winners and finalists are models for other cities around the world to learn from, adapt, and improve upon. Cities of Service works with winners and finalists to develop resources to share with other cities so they can implement similar programs in their own communities.

