

## Community engagement done right: The Backyard Initiative

If you want a blueprint for effective community engagement, take a look at what Allina Hospitals and Clinics, the Cultural Wellness Center, and neighborhood residents in South Minneapolis have accomplished as part of a partnership known as the [Backyard Initiative](#).

In only one year, residents designed and conducted a massive local health research study that included large dinner dialogue gatherings, smaller listening circles, and 677 walk-around interviews (reaching one out of every 20 households in the area). Their findings and recommendations are summarized in a 34-page assessment [report](#).

Nearly a dozen Citizen Health Action (CHAT) teams and a 35-member Community Commission on Health—both made up mostly of neighborhood residents—are now using that report to develop and implement action plans.



Allina Hospitals and Clinics began this [partnership with South Minneapolis residents](#) in 2008 to improve the health and healthcare of people who live within a square mile of Abbott Northwestern Hospital, Allina Commons, and Phillips Eye Institute in South Minneapolis— an area Allina initially referred to as its “backyard.” Allina hired the [Cultural Wellness Center](#), a community-based non-profit, to design and manage community engagement for the partnership.

To be successful, Allina staff recognized that they needed to think differently: "One thing I've learned in my years as a physician is that we can only take health so far by focusing on what we do in the clinical setting. We have to go outside the walls of our institutions if we are going to make a meaningful difference in health," says Dr. Penny Wheeler, Allina's chief clinical officer.

### Where you live matters to your health

One of the first accomplishments of the partnership was to draft a community definition of health, which community residents believed was more than just the absence of disease. They noted the importance of connections among individuals, families, neighbors, culture, and environment. This new definition reflects all too well what public health officials and community developers are now beginning to recognize—[where you live and your relationships with others](#) have a big effect on your health.

When Allina suggested a mail survey could be used to discover the priority health issues of this multicultural neighborhood, residents came up with a better idea: listening circles where people would

give their input in groups, and a walk-around process where people would be asked questions about their health in a face-to-face interview.

The Cultural Wellness Center facilitated the neighborhood dialogue series, training residents and supporting a multi-cultural assessment team to design questions for both the circles and the interviews. More than 200 neighborhood residents from different cultures and age groups attended the listening circles, where three questions were discussed:

1. *How do you keep yourself and your family healthy?*
2. *How do you maintain harmony and balance in your life?*
3. *Who do you turn to for help?*

One 74-year-old resident left one of these meetings so inspired he began organizing the residents in his apartment building around safety issues.

The walk-around interview included 32 questions about physical, mental, social, and spiritual health. The results are still being analyzed by the assessment team and will continue to inform future work.

According to the [Alley Newspaper](#), which has reported on the progress of the Backyard Initiative, many participants have described this process of community engagement as “trustworthy,” “deeply instructive,” “nurturing,” “Informative” and “completely surprising.” As one participant put it, “People want to work together but don’t know how.” The Backyard Initiative has provided a structure that connects people and encourages both listening and cooperation.



“To reach the place where we are today in this long-term relationship,” says Atum Azzahir, executive director of the Cultural Wellness Center, “we honored a process which is tied to indigenous culture and ways of knowing. The process requires interactive learning, deep listening, personal and group reflections. We who came from many places and experiences had to listen to one another. We took the time to listen to the children; we had to relearn how to listen to their experiences. We respected pain, past and present, and we respected the dead and the living.”

This past April, neighborhood residents, Allina, and the Center celebrated the past year’s progress with a gathering at the Allina Commons. Residents presented Allina executives with bound copies of notes from the Backyard neighborhood meetings and thanked them for investing in the community’s health by placing residents at the core of the initiative. Allina, in turn, thanked residents for helping it understand and remember that Allina is in the *residents’* backyard.

## Moving forward

Since then, the Initiative has launched a Community Commission on Health that includes members from each CHAT team. CHATs are work groups made up of residents—including Africans, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and European Americans—who have been studying health prevention strategies and researching appropriate community-based interventions. Allina and LISC are providing resources to help make projects identified by the CHATs and vetted by the Commission a reality. All this and more is captured in a [2010 supplement to The Alley Newspaper](#), which reported to community members about the partnership’s mid-year progress.

“The Backyard Initiative experience is proving to be wonderful teacher for all of us on how healthcare and communities can work together effectively, says Bobbi Cordano, interim president of Allina’s Center for Health Care Innovation. “Once we started this project, we quickly learned that to have a strong partnership we need to pause and listen to the community. Once we did that, we stopped our early efforts, re-tooled this project and moved forward in a different direction with broad-based support from the community. This has led to a much stronger partnership that will lead to significant outcomes and innovations in healthcare that will be replicated in other communities.”

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*Photos courtesy of The Cultural Wellness Center*