

# Community Advocates in Wilkesburg, PA, Ensure Every Baby Reaches Their Full Potential



## 'Best Babies Zone' Reaches Community Members

Wilkesburg, a borough just shy of 16,000 residents in the Pittsburgh metro area, is a community known for the wonderful spirit of its residents. But Wilkesburg also has one of the highest infant mortality rates in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, with a striking difference in mortality rates for Black (14.1) and white (11.3) babies. And 6.1% of children had elevated blood lead levels as estimated by the Allegheny Health Department.<sup>1</sup>

**In the United States, babies born to non-Hispanic African American women are twice as likely to die in their first year of life as compared with babies born to non-Hispanic white women.<sup>2</sup>**

More than 80% of Allegheny County homes were built before 1978, when lead was removed from residential paint, which is one factor contributing to elevated lead levels in local babies and children. Community partners began working across sectors to ensure that every baby is born into a healthy community that enables them to thrive and reach their full potential using an evidence-based model called the Best Babies Zone.

The **Best Babies Zone (BBZ)** Initiative is a national, multi-sector endeavor designed to implement strategies that improve access to quality health care and align and transform educational, economic, and community systems in specific geographic areas.



### BRIGHT CITY: WILKESBURG, PA

#### CONCERNS:

- Elevated blood lead levels in kids
- High infant mortality

#### PROJECT OUTPUT:

- Participating families received a "healthy homes kit" with green cleaners and tips to reduce neurotoxins
- New Healthy Babies Zone activities initiated in surrounding communities

#### KIDS IMPACTED:

- 67+ families with children 5 and under and more outside of this criteria participated in the Fresh Markets



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## What is the Best Babies Zone in Wilkinsburg?

The Best Babies Zone engages the Wilkinsburg community by streamlining collaboration of local health-service providers and community support services. Thanks to funding from Bright

Cities and the Mayors Innovation Project, Best Babies Zone serves as a catalyst for community-wide change.

Wilkinsburg recruited Community Health Advocates from the community to support ongoing programs in the Best Babies Zone. The Community Health Advocate training is an ongoing special project of Healthy Start, Inc. in Pittsburgh. Moms are recruited from the community—primarily via word of mouth and social media—and trained in public health competencies. This training complements the innate wisdom they hold from their lived experience and empowers them as experts in the health of their communities.

**The Community Health Advocates in Wilkinsburg operate a Fresh Market—a market that provides free, fresh produce to community members—and a digital public education campaign called “Hello Fresh Market” as part of the Best Babies Zone.**

“Hello Fresh Market” is a digital education campaign that leverages the reach of the Fresh Market to connect families with resources and education to prevent exposures to toxins that harm the developing brain – like lead in water or [arsenic in infant rice cereal](#).

“However we can engage families on what they can do in their home to prevent lead exposure – including resources for testing and remediation – is a win. Doing that through the expansion of the fresh produce distribution has been incredibly effective.”

Hanna Beightley,  
Healthy Homes  
Coordinator,  
Women for a Healthy  
Environment



Community Health Advocates setting up at the weekly Wilkinsburg Fresh Market to distribute free “healthy homes kits.” Each kit included non-toxic cleaning supplies like vinegar, a spray bottle, a microfiber cloth, baking soda, and a bucket plus easy to read instructions.

The Community Health Advocates partnered with Women for a Healthy Environment, a local organization, to pair produce giveaways with information about reducing lead exposures for babies and young kids.

Advocates shared “Get The Lead Out Wilkinsburg” campaign fact sheets to empower caregivers to take simple and effective steps to reduce lead exposures at home. Information about [tenant rights and habitability](#) and a [general guide to healthy homes](#) was also provided.

## 10 ways to protect your child from lead poisoning

Lead poisoning can have lasting effects in children, from lower IQ to behavioral problems. It happens when people are exposed to lead—which is commonly found in paint, dust, soil and water—especially in homes built before 1978. Some simple steps can help us all *Get the Lead Out, Wilkinsburg*.

<p><b>1. Maintain paint</b>   Routinely check for chipped, cracked or peeling paint</p> <p><b>2. Drink up</b>   Use an NSF-certified water pitcher or faucet-mount filter to remove lead from water, especially during a hot advisory</p> <p><b>3. Chill out</b>   Use cold water for drinking and cooking—never hot tap water—especially baby formula</p> <p><b>4. Wash up</b>   Make sure kids wash hands before eating, especially after playing in the dirt</p> <p><b>5. Step up</b>   Use a dirt mat at your entrance or be a shoe-free home</p>	<p><b>6. Clean up</b>   Weekly, to reduce lead dust, use a mop, sponge or paper towel with water and cleaner on floors, window frames and windowsills</p> <p><b>7. Cover up</b>   Be sure to cover bare soil and use raised garden beds</p> <p><b>8. Play safe</b>   Antique wooden toys, cheap plastic jewelry and imported pottery may contain lead</p> <p><b>9. Get tested</b>   Your children, your home, your water, your soil—all should be tested for lead</p> <p><b>10. Eat well</b>   Foods rich in iron, calcium and vitamin C, and low in fat, can help prevent absorption of lead</p>
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**Get the Lead Out, Wilkinsburg**  
To learn more, get help or take action, visit: [gettheleadoutwgh.org](http://gettheleadoutwgh.org)

The program is working both to keep babies safe *and* to educate parents. While shopping at the Fresh Market, one Wilkinsburg resident said, “I didn’t know any of this! I’m so happy that I now know how to protect my baby from lead poisoning.”

Demia Horsley, Director of Strategic Initiatives for Healthy Start Inc., said, “our biggest success was connecting community residents to the Best Babies Zone Initiative. These connections increased community engagement and helped to create a pipeline to provide education and support to the community.”

There were challenges too—primarily the dramatic change in staff capacity and organizational coordination due to COVID-19. All organizations involved were overburdened as communities served were among those most impacted by COVID. This stifled communication and prevented the undertaking of some tasks that would have been beneficial to the project activities.

**88% of households tested in Wilkinsburg exceeded recommended lead levels in at least one source.**

Get The Lead Out Wilkinsburg Report



## Three Keys to Kick Off Your City’s Best Babies Zone

### 1 Center community residents, including identifying and engaging a community champion.

The Wilkinsburg Community Health Advocates were the project’s biggest champions! These volunteers, with training and support, helped improve the health and well-being of local families. Their passion was essential to motivating and empowering Wilkinsburg residents to get involved in health-promoting activities.

Champions can be a grassroots community leader; a director of a public health department or division; an executive director of a non-profit or community organization; a leader of a city-wide coalition; or a leader from another sector with influence and commitment to a best babies zone.

### 2 Thoughtfully consider staff capacity.

Could you leverage an existing community partnership to help support your project? Or, could you use a “Best Babies Zone” model to build new and/or unexpected partnerships to help support your work?

### 3 Don’t reinvent the wheel!

Make good use of existing resources. Start by reading more about the Best Babies Zone approach, i.e., a place-based, multi-sector, community-driven approach to reducing racial inequities in birth outcomes by mobilizing community residents and organizational partners to address the social, structural, and economic determinants of health and promote health equity.



“One of the most rewarding aspects of this project was sharing knowledge and resources about lead prevention and healthier eating with parents in our community. Parents were so appreciative about getting information that empowered them to provide a healthier life for their kids. Participation in programs like this are an invaluable asset, and I encourage all cities to apply.”

Mayor Marita Garrett | Wilksburg, Pennsylvania

## What's next?

Given the essential role of community members, implementing a community health advocate training specific to environmental health is next. With additional knowledge, community members—with support from community partner Women for a Healthy Environment — plan to tee up more community-lead public lead education programs.

The team also plans to launch the Wilksburg Walking Path as part of the Best Babies Zone. The Walking Path will be a distribution site for lead and healthy homes education and resources and be a fun and safe way to promote physical activity.



The Bright Cities program provides up to \$35,000 in grant funding for US cities and community based partner organizations to reduce exposures — in pregnant women and children under 2 years — to the nine neurotoxins with the strongest associations to developmental delay.<sup>3</sup> These neurotoxins are arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, combustion byproducts called PAHs, banned industrial chemicals PCBs, organophosphate pesticides, a rocket fuel component and fertilizer contaminant called perchlorate, and plastic additives called phthalates.

Curious about funding and technical support to reduce neurotoxic exposures in your city? Contact **Kyra Naumoff Shields**, Bright Cities Program Director, at [knaumoff@hbbf.org](mailto:knaumoff@hbbf.org)



The Mayors Innovation Project is a national learning network for mayors committed to shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing issues— climate change, racial equity, economic revitalization, housing, and more. The Mayors Innovation Project supports mayors by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that mayors can implement.

Looking for peer networking and best practices for city leaders focused on equity, sustainability, and democracy? Contact **Katya Spear**, Mayors Innovation Project Managing Director, [knspear@mayorsinnovation.org](mailto:knspear@mayorsinnovation.org).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 [https://alleghenycounty.us/uploadedFiles/Allegheny\\_Home/Health\\_Department/Programs/Special\\_Initiatives/Lead/Mun\\_Hood\\_Table15\\_19.pdf](https://alleghenycounty.us/uploadedFiles/Allegheny_Home/Health_Department/Programs/Special_Initiatives/Lead/Mun_Hood_Table15_19.pdf)
- 2 Mathews TJ, Driscoll AK. Trends in Infant Mortality in the United States, 2005-2014. NCHS Data Brief. 2017 Mar;(279):1-8.
- 3 Bennett D, Bellinger DC, Birnbaum LS, et al. Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement. Environ Health Perspect. 2016; 124(7):A118-A122.