

TRANSFORMING LIVES AND CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR FAMILIES IN POVERTY

Abstract

The RISE Initiative (RISE) has been established to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty that has plagued the historic African-American neighborhoods occupying two square miles in the north end of West Palm Beach for decades. The goal is not temporary relief for the poor, but rather to attain enduring equity by eradicating the underlying pathology of poverty that has precluded the residents from achieving their potential.

To complicate the solution, gentrification has historically been an existential threat to any struggling population that finds itself ironically adjacent to waterfront wealth in Florida. Recognizing this reality, the first step prior to any revitalization effort is for RISE to unite local neighborhood residents, governmental officials, business leaders, educational professionals, healthcare providers, and other interested parties behind a long-term commitment to prevent the involuntary displacement of historic residents from their homes.

Once the current population is adequately protected, RISE will oversee \$122M in programmatic, public-private investments over a five-year period designed to systematically eliminate the sources of toxic stress and lack of intergenerational mobility that have crippled previous community advancement efforts. The program will employ coordinated, multi-faceted, and place-based solutions to the root causes of localized hardship.

In a relatively short 10-year window, the people living, learning, working, and investing within the RISE geography will experience the following outcomes:

- Birth to Adult Education: Innovative, compassionate, and highly rated neighborhood schools providing infant nurturing, project-based learning and occupational training.
- Mixed-Income Housing: Quality housing options for residents of varying income levels to live cost-effectively in a mixture of rehabilitated and new, single-family and multi-family structures.
- Community Health: Greatly improved resident health and general wellness by assurance of accessible health services, opportunity for exercise, healthy food options, and fresh air.
- Adult Employability: Robust and meaningful employment opportunities with a pathway to lifelong careers creating financial security and commensurate benefits.

- Neighborhood Amenities: Walkable streets, reliable public safety, community engagement spaces, social activities, artistic expressions, environmental sustainability, public parks, and creation of a sense of place are essential elements being provided to create a vibrant community.

The RISE Initiative has been endorsed, and will continue to be assisted, by the nationally recognized Purpose Built Communities organization. This not-for-profit, consultative firm has an impressive track record in revitalizing 17 similar neighborhoods throughout the United States.

The name “RISE” was originally inspired by Maya Angelou’s beloved poem “Still I Rise.” It is also an acronym encouraging all participating individuals, groups and organizations to consistently act with Respect, Integrity and Strength; Virtues that will naturally lead us to Equity.

Respect + Integrity + Strength = Equity

Background

It's a vicious cycle when a neighborhood begins to fail. The mid-century neighborhoods of northern West Palm Beach were originally settled by working-class families, living in mostly white or mostly black neighborhoods. Most residents lived in small but comfortable single-family homes, worked and shopped in locally owned stores, knew their local banker by name, and dined in local restaurants. Few locked their doors. The kids played in parks and front yards. The historic Northboro Elementary, built in 1925, was the area's first school. A second neighborhood school, Northmore Elementary, opened in 1954. The main street, Broadway, was lined with typical Florida-style motels attracting middle-class tourists and filling the busy sidewalks with strolling families.

The second half of the twentieth century brought massive change to certain portions of the City of West Palm Beach. In the long run, most of the changes produced positive outcomes, but they were not without consequences. Some of the lower and middle-class neighborhoods were bulldozed to make room for upper-class housing, upscale services, and shopping for tourists. As with many urban evolutions, existing residents weren't considered or accommodated in the newly fashioned communities. They simply moved on when and where they could.

Some of the displaced concentrated in the northend neighborhoods of West Palm Beach, generally with poverty still on their backs. As a consequence, housing values in their new neighborhoods began to slip, especially those furthest from the water. As the concentration of poverty continued, prices fell further and foreclosure and speculators snatched up the homes, converting them to low quality, low-cost housing. Families began locking their doors. Stores closed and were replaced by specialized providers like pawn shops and used furniture outlets that failed to meet the community's needs.

Before long, there was no longer a major grocery store in the neighborhood and food became available instead from the higher priced and lower quality independent convenience stores. The locally owned large drug store/lunch counter closed and was razed. "Healthy food" became more difficult to find and came at a significant cost. As a downward spiral ensued and with the local hardware store shuttered, residents found it harder and harder to maintain their homes and yards. Window boxes were increasingly filled with broken glass. In a defensive move, some of the neighborhoods closest to the water walled their streets off from Broadway, the main corridor that once connected all the neighborhoods. Before too long, growing enclaves of intense poverty began to emerge.

The physical property was just one aspect of the story. Many of the residents soon assumed the broken look of their homes. The families strolling on Broadway were replaced with less-than-savory characters. The remaining motels started attracting a different type of clientele. As employers continued closing their doors, few jobs remained within walking distance and unemployment quickly started to climb.

Playgrounds were now broken and dangerous, vexing children who tried to have fun wherever they could find it. School became their “safer” place. Northmore Elementary did the best they could in a state where school funding is among the nation’s lowest. The school’s buildings were replaced in 2000, but the neighborhoods weren’t.

No single element produces a healthy neighborhood—its health is determined by a myriad of factors occurring in synchronization: clean water and air; nutrition; access to quality healthcare; well-paying jobs nearby; exercise; mental and emotional stimulation; safety and comfort; and, support systems.

That’s why many well-meaning government, private, and charitable ventures focusing on only one or two elements fail to fix unhealthy neighborhoods. Public housing projects alone aren’t the answer—they simply warehouse poverty. Holiday food drives may fulfill poor families for a day, but without a sustainable plan to train people for reliable employment, the cycle of poverty repeats.

The Problem

As challenging as this story is, it is compounded by the fact that poverty is an unrelenting inheritance. While its effects are often hidden on the earnest faces of young children, as they mature most are destined to remain poor. In 2014 Harvard economics professor Raj Chetty and associates published a study that has become transformational in the understanding of social mobility in the United States.¹ Some key findings:

1. There is a parallel relationship between the incomes of parents and the incomes their children will have as adults.
2. As a result, the upward mobility promised in the American dream is a myth for most raised in poverty. Obstacles are far greater than just rundown houses in public housing projects. The solution is a long-term, multi-disciplined, public-private partnership of neighbors helping neighbors to reverse and permanently eradicate the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

2018 RISE focus area statistics underscore the lack of intergenerational mobility of residents.

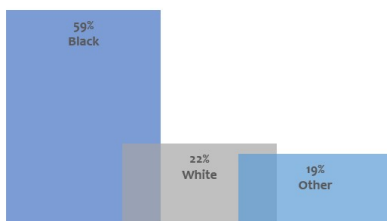
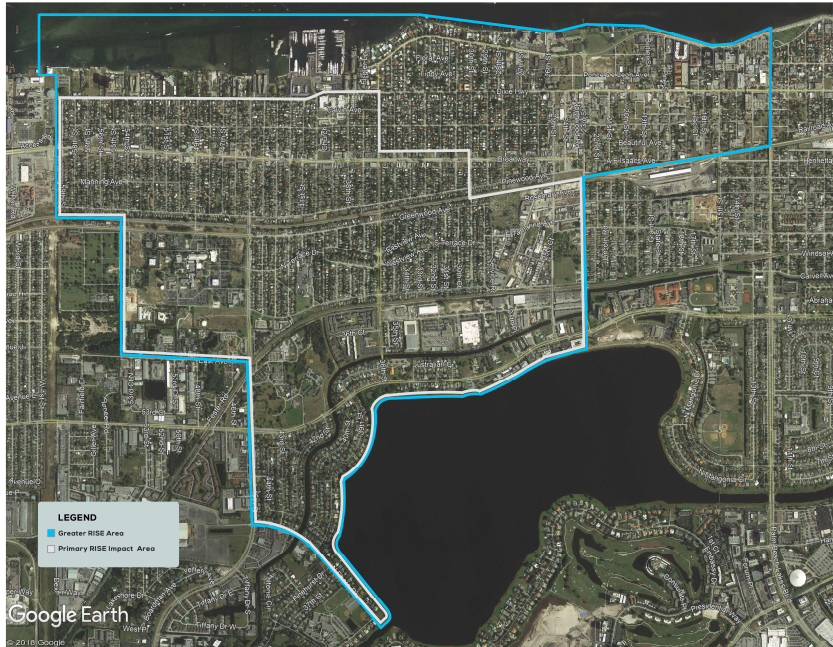
- Percent of Households Below Poverty Level – 29%
- 2018 Poverty Level/Family of Four – Less than \$22,113
- Percent of Gross Housing Costs greater than 30% of Income – 58%
- Per Capita Income – \$18,000
- Median Home Value -- \$206,000

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2018/01/11/raj-chetty-in-14-charts-big-findings-on-opportunity-and-mobility-we-should-know/>

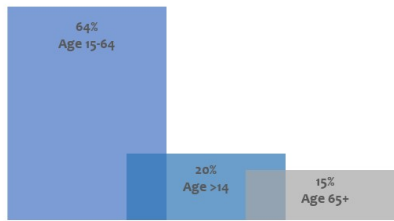
A COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

The RISE Initiative overall focus area is a relatively compact 1.98 square miles in northern West Palm Beach, referred to as the Primary RISE Impact Area and outlined in white on the Site Map.

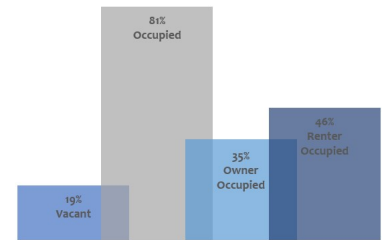
RISE Impact Area approximately 1.98 sq/miles



2018 Population by Race/Ethnicity



Total Population 10,178



4,124 Housing Units

POVERTY AND EDUCATION ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED

The childhood demographics of the Primary RISE Impact Area are illustrated in 2018 enrollment at the neighborhood school, Northmore Elementary. Of its 546 students:

- White, Non-Hispanic comprise 3.7%
- Black, Non-Hispanic 51.6%
- Hispanic 42.7%
- Other 2%
- Students on free/discounted lunch 97.9%

The challenges faced by Northmore Elementary are accentuated by school rankings. The nonprofit school rankings website Greatschools.org gives Northmore a 2 out of 10 rating, with three ominous notes in bold: Test scores “Very concerning,” Student progress “A worrisome sign,” Low-income students test scores “Very concerning.”¹

HEALTH ISSUES COMPOUND THE PROBLEM

In addition to the economic and educational challenges of the impact area, there are serious concerns around medical, mental, and behavioral health issues.

Chronic illnesses such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension are more prevalent in the target area than county averages. Alarming, infant mortality in portions of the target area are more than double that of Palm Beach County's average of 4.5%.²

Mental health was the principal diagnosis in 3.5% of emergency hospital visits in the area (total 908 ER visits). The mental health diagnosis code which appeared most often (56%) was "mental and behavioral disorders due to psychoactive substance use." In 2015 the area had a higher percentage of residents reporting poor mental health than in the rest of West Palm Beach.³

The Path to RISE

It is clear there is no quick and easy single solution to the complex problem of intergenerational poverty. It will require a long-term "Systems Change." To begin the process, a coalition of neighborhood leaders, governmental and civic leaders, educators, healthcare professionals, and business groups created the RISE Initiative. As an additional resource, the coalition partnered with the nation's leading independent, nonprofit neighborhood revitalization organization, Purpose Built Communities, headquartered in Atlanta. The Purpose Built mission is to partner with local organizations such as RISE to help create vibrant communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. Among its key objectives:

- Entrenched poverty is often tied to a place; if we can transform the place, we will improve lives.
- Everyone deserves the opportunity to live and raise their children in communities where they can achieve their full potential.⁴

The Systems Change envisioned by the RISE Initiative includes seven focus areas.

² Community Health Improvement Plan, June 2017

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://purposebuiltcommunities.org/>

Focus Area #1 – Mixed-Income Housing

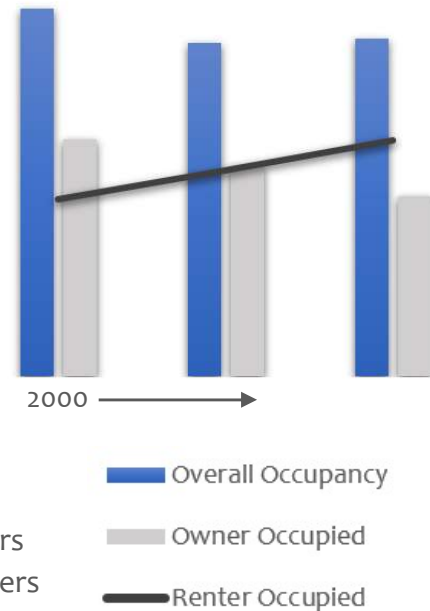
A common indicator of a struggling neighborhood is the trifecta of declining overall occupancy, declining owner-occupancy, and consequent rise in rentals. In the Primary RISE Impact Area, the percentage of resident homeowners has declined over the past two decades from 57% in 2000 to just over 43% in 2018. By contrast, the percentage of resident renters has climbed.

Another indicator is lack of quality housing options in a variety of price ranges. Neighborhoods comprised of established and new mixed-income housing offer a variety of options to residents wishing to participate in the rebirth of their neighborhood while staying at or near home with their friends and, oftentimes, families. Likewise, a variety of housing options are necessary to attract teachers, first responders, and healthcare providers serving the neighborhoods, as well as local industry workers employed nearby.

Some of the housing options will be new construction of quality multifamily apartments on vacant or otherwise uninhabited lots. The emphasis, though, will be on rehabilitating older homes, rather than razing them, to minimize disruption of neighborhoods and forcing residents to relocate. To discourage the practice of investors or property owners purchasing lots, razing the existing structures, then building large homes that may be out of character with the neighborhoods, the RISE Initiative will work with the Northend Coalition of Neighborhoods and the City of West Palm Beach to establish appropriate regulations.

In addition to housing stock, aging infrastructure common to most established communities, will be addressed as part of the RISE Initiative. A community master plan, in a collaborative partnership with neighborhood associations, the Florida Department of Transportation, the City of West Palm Beach (a RISE Founding Partner), and the School District of Palm Beach County (a RISE Founding Partner), will ensure that as the community develops, it will become a safe, walkable, cohesive community. Much of the targeted geographic area was recently designated a qualified Federal Opportunity Zone which will likely attract additional infrastructure investment partners.

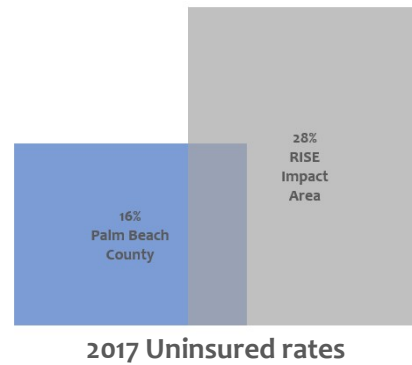
An environment that facilitates renovation as well as new construction, and practical amenities with safe walkways and streets, will transform the way residents view their neighborhoods and themselves.



Focus Area #2 – Community Wellness

As in most struggling communities, the northern West Palm Beach neighborhoods lack ready access to nearby and safe activity spaces, health facilities, pharmacies, and fresh, healthy foods. A 2017 study by the Health Council of Southeast Florida shows that a significantly higher percentage of residents lack health insurance as compared to the rest of Palm Beach County.

Two Founding Partners of the RISE Initiative, The Quantum Foundation and Tenet/St. Mary’s Medical Center, have agreed to work together to identify and prioritize local healthcare delivery needs and complete a health and wellness work plan. Included will be strategies to incentivize healthcare and wellness providers to locate offices and clinics throughout the northend West Palm Beach neighborhoods, possibly to include free clinics for basic and school-age child health services.



Additional priorities are ensuring each eligible student is health-ready to enter school with vaccines and check-ups, and helping students maintain school attendance as a result of good health.

Another RISE Founding Partner, the Education Foundation of Palm Beach County (EFPBC), received grant funding for a program known as Conscious Discipline through which teachers and administrators in the underserved, high-risk RISE Initiative neighborhoods will be trained in proven mental health and social-emotional learning techniques with the goal of creating a safe environment for all children and improving student performance. In addition, a grant-funded, credentialed Home-School Family Counselor will initiate proactive discussions directly with families in school and home-based settings to create strong, positive relationships. A component of the home-school connection will be education of families about the Florida KidCare insurance programs for children ages 0-18, and facilitation of enrollment where needed.

As noted earlier, the Primary RISE Impact Area had a higher percentage of residents reporting poor mental health than in the rest of the city. Working with neighborhood organizations, RISE Initiative partners, and other resources in the health and substance abuse fields, innovative approaches will be developed to take prevention and treatment to neighborhood streets.

Focus Area #3 – Birth-12 Education & Parenting

In order for a community to break the bonds of poverty, it has to start with its youngest members. The RISE Initiative will bring a holistic approach, starting with parenting, to create a model that includes a “cradle-to-career” pipeline of success.

Learning begins well before formalized education. During the first twelve months of life, wondrous growth of sensory, language, and higher cognitive function is achieved by infants given the opportunity to learn. Continuing for the first few years, one million neural connections are formed in the brain every second. How those connections are made is dependent on the infant’s environment.⁵

One of the saddest signs of intergenerational poverty is parents who had no opportunity to experience a nourishing childhood themselves, and therefore do not have the tools to provide one for their children. One of the first projects of the RISE Initiative will be to expand parenting education programs within the focus area.

The RISE Initiative will leverage private and public funds to build an infant/toddler center and pre-kindergarten early learning facility, available to parents and children on a sliding fee scale in the focus area. Quality early learning experiences have been proven to help prepare children by providing them with basic learning skills before they enter the critical K-2nd grades, greatly enhancing their chance for lifelong success.

The School District of Palm Beach County is committed to this collaborative effort and will leverage funding resources for neighborhood elementary schools, to include Kindergarten through eighth-grade classroom learning strategies.

Palm Beach County recently adopted an additional one percent sales tax increase over ten years for public school enhancements and local government infrastructure. From this, Northmore Elementary is slated to receive over \$5.5 million in additional funding, and Northboro Elementary, nearly \$2.5 million. These dollars will be leveraged against public and private philanthropic dollars to establish acclaimed, “A-rated,” neighborhood schools.

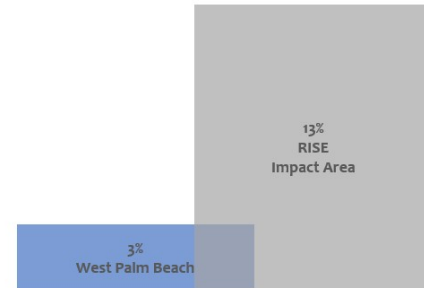
⁵ <https://www.educareschools.org/the-challenge/>

Focus Area #4 – Adult Employability Skills Training

Northern West Palm Beach is fortunate to have several major employers located within or near its neighborhoods. All are partners and strong supporters of the RISE Initiative and have committed to neighborhood revitalization and new employee training and employability skills programs that lead to high paying jobs and careers. These organizations now include: Florida Power & Light, Tenet/St. Mary’s Medical Center, Tropical Shipping, and the Rybovich Marine Center.

The resident median age within the RISE focus area is 37; an age that should be eminently employable. This is juxtaposed against the area’s unemployment rate that stands at more than four times that of West Palm Beach, as a whole.

RISE partners including Palm Beach Atlantic University, Palm Beach State College, Career Source of Palm Beach County, and the School District of Palm Beach County, among others, are developing employability skills training programs designed to train unemployed and underemployed residents. Working with Palm Beach State College, the RISE Initiative’s marine industries partners, for example, are helping to develop a Marine Worker Training Program to fill high-paying jobs in that industry.



2018 Unemployment rates

Focus Area #5 – Public Safety

Safe neighborhoods are at the core of neighborhood revitalization. Children must feel safe when walking or biking to and from school or waiting for the bus. Residents must feel secure in their trips to the local grocery store. And businesses must be confident their employees and investments will be protected.

Public safety begins with neighborhood-directed community planning. As noted in focus area #6, the community plan includes efficient, business-friendly traffic flow along the primary corridors, Broadway and Australian Avenue; and traffic-calmed, pedestrian- and cycling-friendly interior streets. Sidewalks and appropriate street lighting, neighborhood parks, possibly a pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks – these are all improvements that add to community connectivity and safety.

Public safety continues to build with mutual trust. Working hand-in-hand with neighborhood leaders and the West Palm Beach Police Department (WPBPD), the RISE Initiative will incorporate public safety into neighborhood listening sessions with the goal of targeted

Focus Area #7 – Art, Recreation & Green Spaces

Another hallmark of great neighborhoods is safe, accessible, and well-maintained public spaces. The RISE Initiative will work with neighborhood groups to re-envision public spaces, including under-utilized parks, “pocket parks,” and green spaces to encourage neighbor-to-neighbor interaction, activity, relaxation, and a positive community ethos.

Many communities have found the arts to be a stimulus to increased innovation, cultural diversity, and civic engagement that builds neighborhoods. Beyond the current program of “art in public places,” RISE will use art as placemaking to inspire a collaborative, communal process where the residents create beautiful, vibrant and useful spaces and broader community. This approach to urban planning has been shown to help stimulate local economies, increase innovation, diversity, and civic engagement⁶.

Also on the drawing board is a plan to establish a local Museum for African American History and Culture in the neighborhood intended to honor the neighborhood’s historic residents, and add new opportunities for learning and engagement.

⁶ Silberberg, Susan, (2013). Places in the Making, how placemaking builds places and communities. Boston: MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Join us in our journey of
transforming lives and creating opportunity

STILL I RISE

by Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise