



# MEETING HIGHLIGHTS



## COMMUNITY SAFETY BY DESIGN:

### How Built Environment Interventions Can Support Safer Communities

Thursday, Nov 3rd, 2022

10:00AM—11:30AM

Presented via Zoom; 65 Attendees

All presentations and related meeting materials are located on the HCTF website:

<https://www.dvrpc.org/Committees/HCTF/>

### Welcome and Introductions

Amy Verbofsky started the meeting by welcoming everyone and explaining ground rules for the zoom meeting. She then introduced Patty Elkins.

Patty Elkins, Deputy Executive Director with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning commission (DVRPC), officially opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and encouraging attendees to complete a poll to get a better sense of who was in the “room”. She then provided a brief overview of DVRPC and the Healthy Communities Task Force.

Following this, Patty discussed the importance of gun violence prevention, on a national and local scale. According to a PEW survey, 70% of Philadelphia residents consider gun violence to be one of the biggest local issues. More Americans died of gun violence in 2020 than any other year on record. Patty emphasized that although there are many things one can be doing right now, such as volunteering or voting, exploring what one can do in their professional lives is important. Dr. Charles Branas and Kelvin Boddy, speakers for the webinar, are both doing much work in the area of health and safety. Patty then introduced Keri Salerno, the Senior Director of Economic Inclusion at the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) and chair of FitCityPHL.

Keri provided a brief overview of FitCityPHL, a committee that brings together individuals from sectors like architecture, planning, public health, landscape, academia and development together to design strategies to improve the public health of neighborhoods and cities. Keri noted that FitCityPHL has organized past events focused on public health crises like violence prevention. Keri then thanked the program organizers and sponsors, and mentioned an upcoming FitCityPHL event at **8am on Tuesday, Dec 13th**. FitCityPHL will be hosting an in-person tour of PHMC’s new Health Campus at **4601 Market Street**. FitCityPHL transformed the former Provident Building into a health hub where resources such as a health clinic, case management services, educational opportunities and more can be found in one convenient location.

Amy then introduced Dr. Charles Branas, a Gelman endowed professor and Chair of Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia and encouraged everyone to submit questions to the Q&A box as well as read the biography provided for more information on his accomplishments.

She noted that Dr. Branas was one of the first people to work with community partners to lead a citywide randomized control trial to transform vacant lots and abandoned buildings as sustainable solutions for improving health and safety, including a reduction in gun violence. He also has deep local connections to Philadelphia and founded the Penn Urban Health lab, and has numerous affiliations with the University of Pennsylvania and Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

## Dr. Charles Branas, Gelman Professor & Chair of Epidemiology, Columbia University

Dr. Charles Branas opened his presentation by thanking everyone for attending, and also noted the important contributions to his work by Dr. Gina South, Director of the Penn Urban Health Lab. Over the course of his career, uniting planners and public health has been a goal of his.

Geography and health have always gone hand in hand, and Dr. Branas explained that a zip code is often a better predictor of health and longevity than any other factor, including even genetic code. Because of this, place-based interventions are vital to improving health outcomes. Dr. Branas noted that gun violence mirrors how we think about other communicable diseases, such as malaria. This is because they have similar dynamics in the sense that both involve the pathogen, specific people, and specific places. He emphasized that it was important to not only consider the people and the pathogen, but also the environment in which it occurs. Historically, this can be seen through the proliferation of gun violence in neighborhoods that were redlined or abandoned. This information also presents an opportunity for identifying solutions for these areas.

In collaboration with Dr. South and John Macdonald, Dr. Branas spoke about a concept they used called “in-situ” place-based changes. These are straightforward changes or improvements that don’t necessarily draw in individuals from outside the neighborhood, but rather make sense in the context they are placed in. These are meaningful structural changes that can be inexpensive, but also have a focus on being structural, scalable, and sustainable. This helps add permanence and stability, so the structure can be afforded and maintained for decades. Examples include community gardens, transit, business improvement districts, and more.

Dr. Branas shared the work of Aaron Chalfin, affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, who conducted a lighting experiment in New York City. Temporary lighting structures were installed, which led to a reduction in violence in the study areas. Other projects Dr. Branas has worked on, which he noted were community initiated and co-designed, often had many partners across various academic, institutional, private and governmental sectors, as well as parties from other cities.

A key part of the community partnership process was to ensure local residents had the opportunity to decide and communicate what they wanted the solutions to be, to resolve the obstacle, e.g. gun violence. He noted that this is done easily by asking locals what they would do to solve the problem. Through these discussions, it was found that abandoned and/or vacant properties were repeatedly brought up as an issue, more than anything else. Many felt these were dangerous spaces and actively sought to avoid them in their daily lives.

In his research, Dr. Branas found that by working with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) to transform the vacant lots into maintained spaces, there was a reduction in heart rates seen in people passing by. The opposite effect was seen when people passed by overgrown, untouched lots.

Dr. Branas then explained the PHS process in more detail. It was initially started by an East Kensington group in the 90’s. This group was fed up with the state of vacant lots in the area and began fixing them up themselves. This led PHS to develop a more formalized process that is still in use today and has been replicated in other cities as well. PHS has transformed over 10,000 properties through this program.

Dr. Branas and his team at the University of Pennsylvania studied these lots, as well as the City of Philadelphia broken window ordinance, which required homeowners and landlords to install new doors and windows in deteriorating buildings, as well as cleaning the facade and sides. In these randomized studies, the team measured the levels of violence both pre- and post-remediation. The study found that gun violence went down as much as 39% in the study areas that had interventions. Because the renovations were not very expensive, the overall ROI of the project was very high. For every dollar spent, hundreds of dollars were saved because the overall cost of gun violence is so high to begin with. This is largely caused by the cost of law enforcement, high medical bills, and the suffering/trauma for those affected by gun violence.

Dr. Branas refers to these outcomes as “win-win science”, noting that they not only reduced rates of violence but also had other health and social benefits. Greening and other built environment improvements have been shown to reduce rates of depression. Opportunities for recreation and socialization go up because residents feel safer and more comfortable being outside to go for walks or just sit on their stoops and talk to neighbors.

Dr. Branas explained three reasons why they were able to find many successes with these place-based initiatives. First, he noted the study saw positive shifts in “biologic responses” which include stress levels, fear, and aggression. Second, he noted the role of changing “visual cues”, which were signaling that someone is intentionally caring for the neighborhood and creating “busy streets”, in place of abandoned ones. Thirdly, it creates a “means reduction”, as empty or abandoned buildings could no longer be used as storage lockers for weapons.

Dr. Branas then provided a list of example cities where similar studies have been conducted. He also then asserted the importance of cross-sector collaboration, as well as remembering that to make lasting change, work must focus on places or larger dimensions of systems rather than making individual-based changes. Place-based changes can be stand-alone treatments, and don't necessarily need to be complex to make an impact. Dr. Branas then closed by sharing his book, [Changing Places: The New Science of Art and New Urban Planning](#), co-authored with John MacDonald and Robert Stokes.

## Q&A

**Question:** Your work is focused on green vacant lots, and you mention abandoned buildings too. Are there certain interventions that you found to be more effective than others, or are they all good?

**Answer:** Vacant lot greening is less expensive than others. Buildings are slightly more difficult to get in and work on, however there may be some evidence to show the ROI is higher with building improvements. Overall, you could ask local community members and see what they have to say about that too.

**Question:** Earlier in your presentation, you mentioned transportation as a possible strategy. Among things like bike lanes, trails, and so on, what examples of transportation interventions are good?

**Answer:** They are definitely not bad, however a lot of that hasn't been studied enough. Currently, there are people looking into bus shelters. It is also worth looking at light rail systems, current study in North Carolina that is working on that. So there is more information on larger transportation structures, but locally, it may be more important to look into things like Business Improvement Districts and commercial corridor improvements. Transportation is a big part of these too.

**Question:** (Building off of the previous question) Does this relate to the maintenance issue of needing funding to maintain these spaces?

**Answer:** Yes and also even simple acts like picking up trash on the ground has value. We are beginning to look into a larger study of trash pickup and maintenance systems. Even having folks there regularly visible to do the maintenance, is a big deal. This was seen in LA, specifically, with Business Improvement Districts.

**Question:** How were study areas chosen? Were specific areas with higher rates of violence targeted?

**Answer:** The sites were chosen city-wide and they were randomized as well, limited to abandoned buildings and lots. Though they were randomized, there is an existing correlation between where gun violence occurs and these buildings are located. Dr. Branas notes that this is a good question, and suggests that it may be worthwhile to restructure this model slightly to specifically target those neighborhoods that experience the most violence.

**Question:** How has the question of gentrification come up in your work?

**Answer:** It has come up and it turns out 3% of the lots worked on ended up being developed further later, which was lower than expected. There is a study in place to look at the lots after 10 years, so I will get back to you with further results on that, but overall, we don't currently have enough information on that. New Orleans is currently studying that as well.

Dr. Branas noted there is also a study in Youngstown, Ohio that shows that having community members do the cleaning/greening themselves, gave additional benefits in terms of longevity of remediation from gun violence. Managing volunteerism can be a challenge to consider as well, and partnering with municipal entities or similar organizations can help formalize and establish something more long term and sustainable.

**Question:** How far do these benefits from these improvements extend geographically?

**Answer:** Mostly concentrated in space, but have seen some extend out half a mile. We made sure to look at that to ensure gun violence wasn't just being pushed around the corner, which it was not, according to our numerous tests.

## Kelvin Boddy, Director of Healthy Homes and Communities, Housing and Community Network of New Jersey

Amy Verbofsky then introduced Kelvin Boddy, Director of Healthy Homes and Communities for the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (HCDNNJ). Kelvin introduced the HCDNNJ, which is a member organization that is composed of over 270 community developers, non-profits, philanthropic organizations and smaller municipalities. The

organization advocates for affordable, safe, and healthy housing in member communities while also providing training models, adequate resources, and technical assistance to help them achieve this efficiently.

Kelvin then explained the origins of their neighborhood safety and empowerment program, called NEST. Back in 2017, the Network received training from consultants in a traditional safety model called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), but they soon began to feel like the model was missing vital components. The teaching consultants were out-of-state and staffed by people with backgrounds in ex-law enforcement and security, whose approaches did not fully fit the needs of member communities, particularly in terms of implementation. HCDNNJ felt that the consultant's approach to working with communities was too 'heavy-handed' and so they sought to make tweaks to change that. Historically, Kelvin cited crime-reduction approaches originating from the 80's and 90's, such as the Broken Window theory, "stop and frisk", and unofficial arrest quotas as a few failure examples why it was important to take a less punitive approach, and to re-establish healthier relationships with these communities.

HCDNNJ developed the Neighborhood Empowerment and Safety Training (NEST) as a ground-up and collaborative approach to working with communities. They started with ensuring the first steps of the process were working with the residents, local business owners, and anchor institutions before going to the top. HCDNNJ prioritized developing collaborative solutions to issues with these groups. Additionally, HCDNNJ wanted to expand the program beyond just crime, to include elements like walkability, health, perception of crime, resident empowerment, and sustainability.

Kelvin emphasized that creating a culture of empowerment and sustainability within a community, enables them to have better resilience to the inevitable changes that occur when governmental and policy leaders shift. Residents are empowered to identify problem conditions, which authorities are responsible, and what channels to go through to be more effective in organizing for change, regardless of who is in power.

There are 3 main goals of NEST: 1) to expand resident capacity; 2) improve community safety; and 3) to promote the value of the arts. Kelvin explained specifically how the arts component was important because it helps people feel visually represented, and thus more welcome, in their own neighborhood. NEST is also arranged into eight pillars which help identify the specific needs of communities. They are divided between two categories focusing on either the physical environment or the community development side.

The elements of the physical environment that are examined include:

1. Entryways and Routes
2. Maintenance and Visual Appearance
3. Surveillance and Lighting
4. Boundaries and Markers
- 5.

The elements of Community Development that are examined include:

1. The Arts
2. Resident Capacity Building
3. Resident Input and Involvement
4. Sustainable Community Development and Improvement

Kelvin emphasized that retaining the physical environment and not making drastic changes without consent was important. Additionally, these pillars are meant to be used in conjunction with one another, as the physical pillars can get very technical and need balance. The community development pillars were largely based on providing a platform for resident expression and input, in order to generate a greater sense of community and sustainable strategies for development.

Kelvin spoke about how important it was to conduct a field walk around and with the community. A field walk allows residents to identify what is considered an unsafe vacant house or what is an inherently unsafe lot. The field walk can be a great opportunity to begin a dialogue with residents and provide them with a chance to have their voice heard. Another useful community engagement strategy that HCDNNJ employs is going around the town with local business owners, city officials, and police officers to gather survey input from residents and identify opportunities and strengths.

Kelvin then explained the impact of managing entryways and routes in a community, noting that when left unkempt or unexamined can become sites of harmful activity. He explained that common security measures involve more very intense elements like gates, lights, fences, and cameras. Sometimes these are needed, but more often than not, a gate destroys access to a community space that could be better used, and now the community is smaller.

Kelvin explained that there are softer alternatives to these approaches that have a subtler impact. An example of this would be replacing a fence with some green shrubbery or artistically designed community signage. The fence itself cannot do all the work. Signs and visual evidence of continued care and cultivation in the physical environment are effective ways to boost community safety. In addition, continued maintenance is essential.

Kelvin then explained some of NEST's approach to Surveillance and Lighting. It can go beyond architectural alterations or camera installations. Cultivating a culture of "eyes on the street" can be done through collaboration with local individuals and long-time residents, and works as a more natural form of surveillance. This can be as simple as supporting or creating recreational or public spaces that draw different people in. An example of this is converting a vacant lot into a children's playground or setting up chess tables on a busy street where residents can hang out. Additionally, effective use of Boundaries and Markers utilize physical attributes such as gardens or regularly maintained porch fixtures to help express ownership and instill a sense of pride that supports a social and visual culture of safety.

Lastly, Kelvin expounded on the Safety and the Arts pillar. The arts have begun to be seen as both a tool of community expression and one of safety. Art-based boundaries can be created, such as creatively painting a crosswalk, to personalize a space and establish clear boundaries. These interventions can be temporary or permanent. Kelvin shared an example of a painted alleyway in Boise, Idaho that is painted and repainted with different art regularly to keep it fresh and interesting, as well as inviting, which can also bring an economic boost.

Art-based skill sets, such as community garden design, are also a functional and expressive tool. This is a great way to engage with youth, give them a creative outlet to express themselves, and provide experiential learning opportunities. Skills like graphic design are marketable skills that can support youth development and engagement with the arts, as well as create potential future community developers or leaders.

Another pillar component is art-based communication. This can help facilitate a platform for engaging in difficult, complex, or traumatic topics in an easier way, such as having a slam poetry event or building a collaborative mural. Kelvin shared an example of an arts program in New York called Project Reset that allows low-level offenders a chance to clear their record through studio-based art sessions. In this project, 95 percent of participants had their cases dropped. Overall, art-based communication can take many forms, but is beneficial to increase lines of communication and reclaim community spaces.

Safety is a common goal for everyone (residents, business owners, and public sector), but leaning into mutual priorities of various stakeholder groups can help maximize efforts. For example, business owners and residents share a common goal of removing window clutter, that they could collaborate on. Through clearing windows/sidewalk space, it generates a clearer line of sight and people feel safer coming into the store. Another example of a common goal would be between public sector and business owners, working to get grants for façade improvements.

Next, Kelvin spoke about sustainable new development, suggesting that areas like vacant lots or undeveloped land can be thought of as potential "community labs" where the land is available and the stakes are low for development. An example was provided of a vacant lot in Brooklyn. Instead of going with a proposed new development that did not have much public input, the community was merely asked what they wanted to do with the land. Because there was a love of cars and plenty of kids in the community, they developed a car-themed children's park. Because the park was created out of a collaborative process, residents felt more involved and were active in the continued maintenance of the park. Additionally, they were able to use some clutter from the junkyard to build it, lessening cost. Another less intensive example was painting the side of a building with chalkboard paint, to encourage people to interact and personalize their environment.

Overall, NEST provides an opportunity for communities across New Jersey to collaborate and get involved with their leaders in order to keep their neighborhoods safe. It takes a step beyond just policy and short-term fixes to help generate sustained benefits with lasting effects and inclusive processes. Kelvin then shared his contact info ([Kboddy@hcdnnj.org](mailto:Kboddy@hcdnnj.org)) and thanked everyone for listening.

## Q&A

**Question:** How do you incorporate mentorship into your own community development? How do you encourage youth to pursue community development as a career?

**Answer:** Usually the Network doesn't just go into a community without existing connections, they partner with an existing entity such as a Community Development Corporation (CDC) to get started. Through conducting the field walks around communities, often young residents will express they've never really felt their voices heard in this context before.

One of the first NEST projects was in New Brunswick, which was primarily composed of first-generation or foreign-born Americans. After the walks, the residents expressed that though they were still used to making this place their home, NEST had made them feel very empowered by asking them what they would want done, as opposed to being told what was going to happen. It made residents more likely to engage with City Hall, for example, and feel like they have agency in the development process. Overall, it's everyone of all ages that has felt more connected to the community development process, and not just youth.

**Question:** We often hear that residents don't want to go out onto the streets because of gun violence, but one of our goals is to get more people out on the street. Where do you start in that case?

**Answer:** My first thought would be to first reclaim the space, but that is also a reason why it can be helpful to have law enforcement at the table. Law enforcement can't just be the singular police car that sits on the block that no one gets out of, they need to integrate themselves into the community more. If a block party or another event is being held in this space that has a reputation of danger, cops need to be walking around and serving attendees safely.

In one community NEST worked with, this happened and residents expressed they hadn't seen cops actually walking around since the 90's, which is another testament to the benefit of repairing that relationship. The burden of safety should not just be on the residents. But it also takes time to establish that as well (surprising people with police is not a good idea) so gradual integration and buffers are a must.

**Question:** Are you invited to communities by a local Community Development Corporation or a local anchor institution. Do these organizations need to have resources and funding committed? How does that work?

**Answer:** One thing we do as part of the NEST program is provide a list of grants and funding sources that communities are eligible for. They also offer a follow up to provide grant application if needed.

## Closing

Amy Verbofsky closed the meeting by thanking the speakers, FitCityPHL, and everyone for attending. She also asked attendees to complete a post-meeting survey and shared information to obtain AICP CM credits. She noted that there will be another HCTF meeting, focused on mobility and safety, tentatively scheduled for January, as well as a training workshop coming up in the spring.