

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: East Lake, Atlanta

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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East Lake was once one of Atlanta's wealthiest neighborhoods, attracting vacationers and professional golfers to the East Lake Golf Club. But by 1995 it had deteriorated into what some called "Little Vietnam" due to the level of violence. East Lake had become home to a murder each week and crime rates 18 times the national average. The neighborhood's public housing project, East Lake Meadows, was economically and educationally depressed, with 59 percent of its residents on welfare and only 5 percent of its fifth graders achieving state standards in mathematics.

To create new opportunities for its besieged residents, a prominent real estate developer, Tom Cousins, started the East Lake Foundation in 1995. His ambitious goal was to transform the neighborhood. Over the next two years, the Foundation worked with the Atlanta Housing Authority and the East Lake Meadows housing project residents' association to evaluate the neighborhood's needs and to develop strategies to replace the dilapidated public housing project. A turning point for the community was the razing of East Lake Meadows housing project and the development of the new, mixed-income apartments, Villages of East Lake.

East Lake Foundation's comprehensive strategy focuses on three essential goals: cradle-to-college education, safe and affordable housing, and community wellness. A series of public and private partnerships serve as the scaffolding for the collaborative. For example, the nonprofit Sheltering Arms provides early childhood education while EdisonLearning manages a new K-8 charter school with funding and a charter from the Atlanta Public Schools. Private real estate

### Fast Facts:

- **Community:** East Lake neighborhood of Atlanta, GA
- **Problem:** Crime rates 18 times the national average
- **Results:** 95% reduction in violent crime rates since 1995
- **Differentiating Feature:** East Lake Foundation acts as the hub for the collaborative, working directly with partner organizations individually, rather than bringing them together.
- **Leaders / Lead Organization:** East Lake Foundation
- **Philanthropic Support:** East Lake Foundation (initially), private donors

management group, JMG Realty, manages the safe new affordable housing within The Villages of East Lake. The local YMCA works closely with Drew Charter School to offer physical education classes in addition to its other services and the Charlie Yates Golf course offers classes and employment opportunities for neighborhood residents.

The collaborative's impact is evident in the transformation of East Lake from a warzone to a safe, inviting and attractive neighborhood. Violent crime has dropped by 95 percent in the neighborhood, and the proportion of individuals supported by welfare has fallen from 59 percent for East Lake Meadows residents to just 5 percent for the entire neighborhood. Educational attainment has risen dramatically, as well. Today, fifth grade math proficiency has risen from its single digit low in 1995 for East Lake Meadows residents to greater than 80 percent for those who attend the neighborhood charter school. And the reading proficiency for all students in the K-8 charter school has attained the same high percentage number.

These dramatic improvements are partially the result of an influx of higher-income individuals and the exclusion of those former inhabitants with the worst criminal records. However, one-time residents who lived in the East Meadows project prior to 1995, and have returned, have seen similarly impressive gains along these metrics among their children<sup>1</sup>.

**Three key things have made the East Lake Foundation and its partners successful:**

**Community shapes its own future:** *Community members as partners and producers of impact.*

The East Lake Foundation began its efforts to help the neighborhood with two years of bi-weekly meetings with the local residents' association and the Atlanta Housing Authority. These meetings gave neighborhood participants a genuine opportunity to shape the future of their community. For example, as a result of community feedback, the residents' association's president strongly advocated for a 50/50 ratio of market-rate to subsidized housing in the new development. The original proposal was for an 80/20 mix, with the majority earmarked for market-rate housing.

**Resources to attract more resources:** *Sufficient resources.*

The East Lake Foundation provided the funding and personnel necessary for the initial two-year planning phase, which culminated in the replacement of the public housing project with a mixed-income development. Costs of demolition and construction were split between the Foundation and the Atlanta Housing

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Boston has tracked all residents who lived in the East Lake Meadows housing project in 1995. Comparing those who have returned to those who have not, shows that life is much better for those who have returned - *Benefits and Cost of Reducing Concentrated Poverty*, 2005.

Authority. With three of its seven non-programming staff members dedicated to fundraising and a fourth focused on marketing and communication, the East Lake Foundation is able to attract resources in a diversified, sustainable manner from a variety of major partners. These contributors include the Coca-Cola Company, supermarket chain Publix, Georgia State University, Atlanta Public Schools and the Atlanta Housing Authority. The Foundation's dedicated fundraising team, combined with a patient long-term approach to investments and a commitment to tracking and publicizing progress on neighborhood metrics, attracts additional funds from local public and private funders and directly contributes to the sustainability of the collaborative's efforts.

**Hub and spoke model:** *Dedicated capacity and appropriate structure.*

In many collaboratives, partner organizations come together in a forum of equals to interact and take action, even when one organization is acting as the convener or leader. East Lake Foundation instead acts as the hub for the collaborative, working directly with partner organizations individually, rather than bringing them together. The Foundation has the sole power to select and recruit partners, reinforce the collaborative's vision and helps integrate programs across providers.

This hub-and-spoke structure allows for less-complex governance and centralized resources. East Lake Foundation's high level authority and dedicated program coordinator also allows it to effectively integrate partner services, identify gaps and fill them. The program coordinator meets regularly with partners to ensure their alignment with the collaborative goals and to collect data on their progress. In this role as convener of public and private organizations, the Foundation is able to quickly respond to arising community needs by bringing on new service providers or phasing out existing partners no longer relevant to achieving the collaborative's goals. In other words, the Foundation uses its role as a funder and leader to ensure partners are aligned with the collaborative's goals. For such a hub-and-spoke model to work, the hub must be either the primary service provider or the lead fundraiser in a community and must have the capacity to actively coordinate among partners.

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