



# The Story of OneCranston

In 2017, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston named Cranston, Providence, and Newport, as the winners of its Rhode Island Working Cities Challenge. The challenge intends to provide local leaders with the opportunity to build capacity for more inclusive local economies through strategies related to things like workforce development, neighborhood revitalization, education, and civic engagement. Cranston's effort was named "OneCranston." In their application, the team of residents and local leaders, explained:

Like many suburban cities throughout the nation, the city of Cranston is becoming more diverse, sharpening the socioeconomic differences between the eastern and western parts of the city. OneCranston embraces these changes and works to increase social cohesion among and between residents in the city, with a focus on Cranston's growing low-income households and communities of color.

Over its initial three years, OneCranston worked to increase social and civic engagement among residents, bringing public, private, and non-profit organizations together with community members to deliberate, collaborate, and connect with one another. Together, with Comprehensive Community Action Program (CCAP) serving as the backbone agency, the four work groups formed sought to improve neighborhoods and address important "opportunity gaps" for youth; increase access to employment and post-secondary opportunities; and ultimately address system-related issues that contribute to persistent socioeconomic disparities in the city through fostering a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion.







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Through a partnership with OneCranston, I was able to take a PLTI class (Parent Leadership Training Institute). One of the assignments was for each person to do a project, something they were passionate about in their community. Mine was after-school programs. When I learned about all the programs and grants available to help the children and schools across the state, I realized I can help make a difference in my children's lives and other children's in the community. I am a parent of three boys, and after-school programs can be expensive. I started going to municipal and school committee meetings, and PTO meetings to get myself familiar with Cranston school systems and budgets. Ayana and Caitlyn saw my interest and offered me a part-time job with the STEM Mentoring program. It was a wonderful experience.

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## Positioning Residents to Lead the Change

OneCranston prided itself on being resident-driven and led. In the same way its programs and services are born from the developing needs of the community, the initiative's leadership team was comprised of those whose passion for the work is grounded in their commitment to their own families and neighbors.

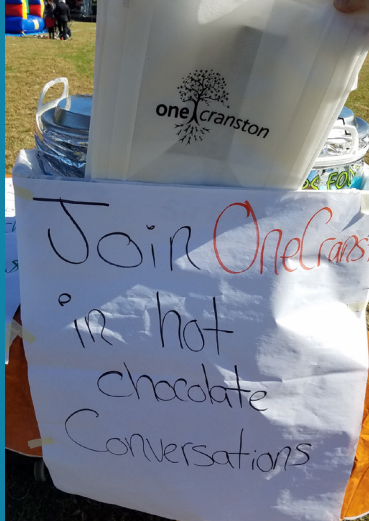
One such leader is long-time Cranston resident April Barron.

A working parent of Cambodian descent, with three children in the Cranston school system and limited access to affordable after-school programs, April was directly aware that not all parents had a voice in the changes needed to improve the existing systems so that all students have access to tools to help them be successful.

April set out to change that - to make a difference in her children's and other children's lives in the community. In 2018, she began networking and volunteering at various PTO meetings where she was introduced to Ayana Melvan, the first initiative director of OneCranston, and Caitlyn Blankenship, OneCranston's Community Engagement Specialist. Both felt that the only way to create a community that civically engages and empowers its residents is to give parents a voice, Ayana and Caitlyn recruited April to work for OneCranston. Consistent with its goal to diversify opportunities for leadership, this position was an ideal fit for April.

Thanks to April's tenacious advocacy, OneCranston's after-school STEM program grew to great success. A vocal advocate for students, April works to get more parents to join her efforts for accessible and affordable after-school programming. She has become an important voice for her community.





In 2020, as OneCranston was ending its initial three-year effort, Cranston was named as a new Health Equity Zone (HEZ) by the Rhode Island Department of Health. Rather than ending the longer-term goals of OneCranston, the workgroups regarding community connections and youth opportunity were adopted by the HEZ and formed as the OneCranston HEZ. In joining forces, the merged initiative is taking a holistic approach to achieving health equity by fostering efforts regarding food access, mental health, and environmental quality, in addition to the continuing efforts of community connections and youth opportunity.

April's journey with OneCranston into the OneCranston HEZ is one of many similar stories from advocates, volunteers, employees, children, and families who have been given the tools and support to help them work together toward shared goals for their community. In its initial three years, OneCranston inspired, organized, and supported a number of opportunities across Cranston that sought to emphasize the strengths of its diversity. Those opportunities included:

### **Parent Leadership Training Institute**

To build a community of civically engaged residents, OneCranston worked with several partners. As a result of this program – a national model to train cohorts of parent residents in community leadership, civic engagement, and advocacy – connections among various parts of the city, residents, businesses, organizations, and other public entities were increased. Parents took a 20-week course to learn how to lead and activate other community members to work together to ensure equitable opportunity for all students in the current system.

**Partners included:** **Thirsty Beaver, Learn to Earn, Roger Williams University, Bain After Performance Club, and The Big Cheese**

### **Neighbors and Friends Nights**

OneCranston and its partners created Neighbors and Friends Nights to engage residents, hear what they had to say about the needs of their communities, and in turn, learn how they can be involved in making positive changes. This campaign led to over 1,000 conversations with residents of Cranston. OneCranston recruited over 160 new activists, members, and stewards to work to help Cranston residents.

Residents participating in the campaign identified priorities for the community including:

- out-of-school time programming
- public transportation
- school improvements

**Partners included:** **Cucina Rustica, Ocean State Kidz Club, Cranston Police Department, Miller's Crossing, Cranston Public Library, Mesa Cafe, St. David's on the Hill, Texas Roadhouse, Big Cheese, Athenian Deli, Anthony's**

### **Community Building Grants**

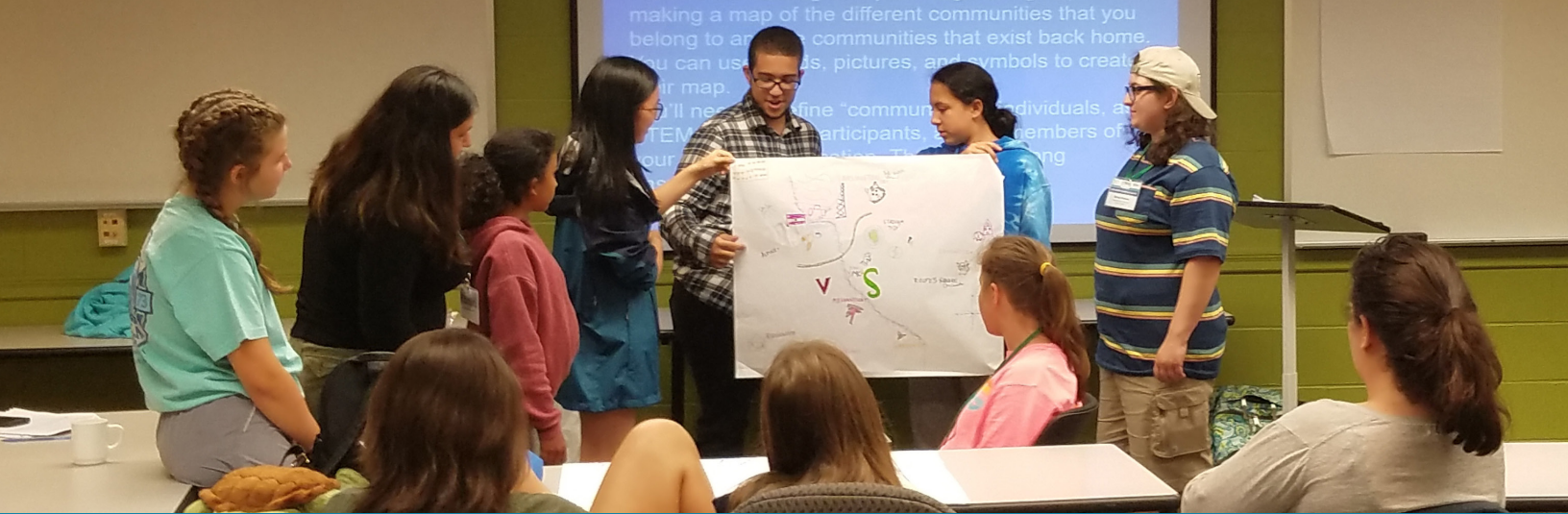
Cranston residents have a lot of great ideas for ways to improve their communities but often lack the resources or the personal connections to make their ideas a reality. The OneCranston Community Builders Grants provided residents with the funds and the support to pursue these ideas that required they connect with their neighbors to pursue shared goals.

Many of the funded projects – including beautification projects, cultural events/celebrations, school improvements, and the enhancement and creation of public spaces – have helped to foster resident engagement within the city. For example, neighbors and Parent Teacher Organizations were able to fund projects that they otherwise would not have had the money for, including building garden beds and adding accessible seating to Cranston West Stadium.

Additionally, a resident-led project helped teach residents on how to audit walkability on local streets through pictures and data collection. The results were then reviewed at a public meeting, where residents also heard from the City's Planning Department and several Cranston residents who are transportation and municipal planners.

**Partners included:** **Cranston Public Library, Cranston Planning Department, Horsley Witten Group**





## Cranston Community Learning Events

The Cranston Public Library and OneCranston partnered to offer residents Community Learning events, at which Cranston residents could discuss issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The library provided a trusted and indispensable gathering space where residents came together to share information and ideas on how to strengthen the community. The first gathering was a kickoff event for Reading Across Rhode Island of The Hate U Give and most recently, for Ibram X. Kendi's book, *Stamped: A Remix*. Other events included a viewing and facilitated discussion of the PBS documentary "American Creed," as well as a training for municipal leaders by the Racial Equity Institute.

**Partners included:** Cranston Public Library, Cranston City Council, Rhode Island Foundation.

## Youth Opportunity Zone

In an effort to improve youth reading and connect youth and their families to the concept of social cohesion, OneCranston and the YMCA partnered to create the Youth Opportunity Zone (YOZ). The OneCranston YOZ focused on increasing affordable access to after-school and summer programs, especially to those who cannot afford them.

The initiative has been an overwhelming success:

- Over 300 additional children were able to participate in after-school programs
- Six YOZ partners actively involved in increasing STEM-based curriculums
- Cranston has received over \$400,000 to serve additional youth through after-school and summer programs
- 30 percent of STEM mentees have participated in partner programs and/or serving as a mentor
- 10 percent of peer mentors returned for multiple years

- Increased representation and retention of mentors from communities of color
- All of the mentors that have graduated high school now attend college

YOZ continues to strive towards equitable and affordable access to out-of-school programs. YOZ gives youth a purpose and allows for decreases in crimes committed by adolescents, getting arrested, doing drugs, and engaging in secular activity.

**Partners included:** CPS school principals at Gladstone, Bain, Woodridge, Edgewood Highland, Rhodes, Global Science and Envirotech, YMCA, Ocean State Kidz Club, PLTI, STEM Advantage, Cranston Public Library, Roger Williams Zoo, Sea Research Foundation, Mystic Aquarium, 21st CCLC, Cranston Parks and Recreation, and the Cranston City Council.

## Looking Ahead: The Future of Our Efforts

As the population of Cranston continues to become more diverse and the need to address issues surrounding equity continue to evolve, OneCranston HEZ stands ready to respond with great intention and the spirit of collaboration for which we have become known. We remain committed to cultivating unique resident-guided partnerships to sustain and grow all our work to reduce health and other disparities and build a community of trust and belonging.

**Please visit [www.cranstonhez.org](http://www.cranstonhez.org) to learn more.**

Get involved!

