



CONNECT COMMUNITY

Connect Community is a community-based collaborative rooted in principles of youth justice and power sharing. The collaborative's mission is to meet the needs of youth and families in the Gulfton/Sharpstown area by engaging residents, private foundations, and public and government entities through community engagement, shared decision-making, and resident and youth mobilization. By connecting large-scale planning efforts like neighborhood infrastructure development with youth leadership development, Connect Community promotes a holistic, multi-layered approach to transform Gulfton and promote health and wellbeing for youth and their families.

Connect Community was established as a non-profit in 2016 through partnerships with KIPP Texas, St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Legacy Community Health, and the YMCA operating in the Gulfton/Sharpstown Impact Zone. In 2019, the nonprofit formed a collaborative of community leaders and dedicated educators to work with youth and families, providing them with resources and pathways for achieving a healthy and prosperous life. Throughout the years, collaborative members, including representatives from local education providers and schools, advocacy organizations, and youth, have partnered to co-develop a collective vision of a healthier, more connected Gulfton.



THE GULFTON NEIGHBORHOOD features a rich tapestry of cultures and languages, described today as a present-day Ellis Island. Home to a diverse population of immigrant communities, 88% of residents report speaking a language other than English and have migrated from over 33 countries. The neighborhood is densely populated with a large proportion of multi-family housing units, however, low median wages and lack of access to resources due to language and culture differences create barriers for families to thrive. In 2017, Gulfton was designated by the Houston Mayor's Office as a Complete Community to address historic under-resourcing and identify opportunities for equitable investment in culturally responsive assets for Gulfton residents.

HEARING FROM GULFTON RESIDENTS

The collaborative used the [THRIVE Framework](#) to assess the opportunities, challenges, and dreams of Gulfton community members. Through their assessment process, the collaborative reaffirmed education, norms and culture, and neighborhood safety as important factors to address that impact community health and wellbeing. In working with residents, the collaborative also found that there was a desire for increased trust and community building across the diverse cultures of Gulfton through meaningful engagement and connection.



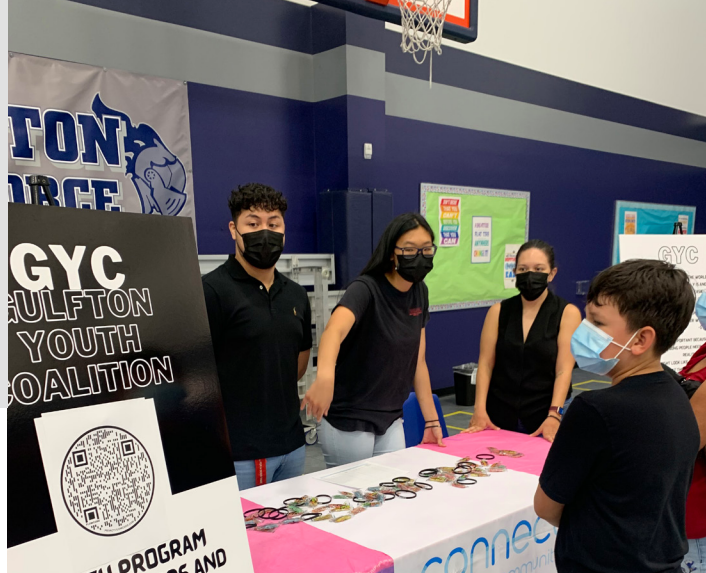
YOUTH LEADER, ALEXANDER LOPEZ, SHARES “We are bringing together as many people as possible, not only young people but families and others who are part of the community and asking what they would like to improve - we’re creating change throughout the people’s environment and creating a generational impact.”

The collaborative took on a role to not only provide resources and develop messaging around the importance of connection in education, they also worked to identify and empower youth and resident leaders to build a foundation of belonging and shared decision-making. By bringing together multiple generations of families with passionate stakeholders and community-based organizations, the collaborative works to ‘connect the dots’ and bridge their values of youth leadership and development with community well-being and transformation.

BUILDING MEANINGFUL YOUTH AND ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the collaborative wanted to understand first-hand the unique needs of students and the uncertainties that come with planning for college and the future. The Gulfton Youth Coalition (GYC) was established to provide spaces for students to authentically connect and share their hopes and challenges. Collaborative leaders and educators worked to recruit youth from high schools in the Gulfton area, hoping to represent a wide array of backgrounds, diverse experiences, and dreams for the future.

At the heart of the collaborative are dedicated youth leaders who have built strong relationships with collaborative partners and work alongside leaders in decision-making and strategy development. The collaborative helps youth build skills by encouraging them to lead events and strategies while adult partners provide guidance and support, having them engage in learning and leadership development in a safe environment. Over time, GYC members have experienced greater confidence, acting as the face of Connect Community in a variety of settings



including board meetings, public events, and engagement with the media.

LIFE GROUP SESSIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, collaborative members established virtual open sessions based on the Life Group model as an additional opportunity for youth to connect with each other and receive guidance from knowledgeable adults as they navigated school and work from home. These Life Groups served as spaces for youth to hear from trained adult facilitators about specific topics and engage in a safe, authentic discussion with other young people. Discussion topics often went deeper than just college readiness, touching on mental health and wellbeing, culture, and self-actualization.



YOUTH BOARD MEMBER, ERIKA NGO, SHARES “I continue with the collaborative due to the investment in myself - people have invested time into me and my passions and see the changes in the community, I want to spread resources that we have to develop more opportunities for youth, [and build] more seats at the table.”

As the Life Groups continued meeting over time, the adult leaders stepped back to give space for the youth to lead their own discussions, introduce new topics, and build connections with each other. This shift reflects the core belief of Connect Community, where adults act as resources and stewards alongside youth leaders

to provide support and the freedom to think outside the box. The connections fostered through these Life Groups provide an additional anchor for youth in the community, where reliable and trusted adults can leverage their connections and create opportunities for youth to lead and be heard on the issues most important to them.

EMPOWERING YOUTH LEADERS

Student leaders from the Gulfton Youth Coalition worked to recruit additional youth from schools in the surrounding area to the collaborative, building momentum and visibility for youth-led events and advocacy. The leaders synthesized what they heard from their community and would then work with adult partners to relay what they saw as important messaging to co-develop effective advocacy strategies. Some of the GYC's advocacy strategies include improved street safety and safer bus stops for pedestrians, 'greening' measures to reduce neighborhood heat levels, and the incorporation of social-emotional learning into classroom environments.

Throughout the work of Gulfton Youth Coalition, adult leaders would step back to allow youth to take on leadership opportunities in their schools and communities, giving them the space to grow and make connections. As the youth worked in community and developed strategies, collaborative partners would provide support by identifying the right organizations and community mobilizers to lift up and embolden their messaging.

The Gulfton Youth Coalition student leaders also facilitated events and activities to advocate for more equitable schools to ensure youth in Gulfton could receive their education in a safe and welcoming environment. Recognizing the Gulfton area as a multi-cultural and multi-lingual neighborhood, youth leaders worked with adult collaborative coordinators to provide culturally-relevant activities for young people to connect and learn more about the collaborative's advocacy goals.

With youth navigating isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic and the following years, collaborative coordinators looked for opportunities to incorporate meaningful relationship building between youth.



RYAN VILLARREAL, COLLABORATIVE COORDINATOR AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GARDEN YOUTH CENTER, SHARES

"Service provision is critical, but it should be our floor - not our ceiling. Research shows us that tackling upstream issues creates lasting change, so we've designed a space for youth to engage with these deeper challenges. We ask the difficult questions and partner with them to build solutions."





GROWING THE GARDEN FOR A BRIGHTER GULFTON

Through their long-standing community assessment and engagement work with youth and families in Gulfton, the collaborative built deep roots and strong partnerships embedded in the community. St. Luke's United Methodist Church, a long-term partner of the collaborative, looked to break ground on a community center designed for youth and invited the collaborative to support and inform the center's design and activities

The collaborative invited long-standing leaders from their Gulfton Youth Coalition to join the building's Youth Board, which provided input on all building design elements to ensure it reflected the culture and vision of the residents who would use it. Community members and the Youth Board ultimately decided on the name for the center, The Garden, signifying the purpose of the building as an enriching and safe space, established to nurture, protect, and help youth blossom.



"Leadership is not something to simply hand over to young people—it is something we cultivate together. Youth possess innate instincts for change that are powerful, and leadership is a craft that flourishes with sustained mentorship and development. Through collaboration, we help them refine their natural abilities while they help us see new possibilities." - **RYAN VILLARREAL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GARDEN.**

A ribbon cutting ceremony was held for The Garden on June 6th, 2024, with the completed youth center housing a variety of multi-purpose rooms designed for community convenings, meetings, events, and an array of extracurricular activities. As The Garden grows, their hiring focuses on bringing in youth and adult staff members that reflect the diverse cultural tapestry of Gulfton to make the space familiar. With these principles in mind, the center helps youth build confidence, learn new skills, and engage in opportunities for economic development and professional growth.

The Garden offers additional resources and amenities for youth, with spaces for studying, arts, and physical activity with scheduled programming and state-of-the-art equipment. With a focus on mental and social wellbeing, quality education, and community connection, The Garden is a legacy to the deep work of educators and the passionate youth they've worked with over the years to transform the physical and social environment of Gulfton, creating lasting change for generations.

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