



HEALTHY OUTDOOR COMMUNITIES

Healthy Outdoor Communities (HOC) is a community-based collaborative championing equitable access to parks, green space, and nature to uplift community health and wellbeing in the Acres Homes and Third Ward neighborhoods in Houston. HOC members believe that when everyone has the opportunity to enjoy outdoor spaces in their community, children are happier, people are healthier, families are closer, and life is better.

Healthy Outdoor Communities was founded by Nature & Eclectic Outdoors (NEO) as an initiative to encourage families and children in underserved communities to utilize local parks and green spaces as tools to improve community health, well-being, and resilience. In partnership with Houston Parks Board (HPB), and with generous support from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, the initiative quickly grew to a large collaboration of residents, community-based organizations, and stakeholders to focus on efforts in the Acres Homes and Third Ward communities.

HOC partners work together to address park and green space inequities that contribute to poor community mental and physical health outcomes in these neighborhoods. The collaborative is led by HOC's Core Team, which consists of representatives from Nature & Eclectic Outdoors (NEO), Houston Parks Board (HPB), and four Community Engagement Liaisons, who are community residents representing Acres Homes and Third Ward. The Community Engagement Liaisons provide

invaluable insight and input in HOC's work. They are an essential connection to the community, as they represent HOC at various community meetings, events, and activities and share HOC-related information and opportunities to residents, while bringing community issues, reflections, and events back to the Core Team and the larger collaborative.

The core values that guide HOC are being **community-driven, goal oriented, inclusive, transparent**, and ensuring all collaborative activities are guided by Acres Homes and Third Ward community members in the best interest of children and youth of color (and their families). HOC is grounded in research that shows spending time in nature provides children, youth, and people of all ages a wide range of health benefits.



JENNIFER BOLEY, Director of NEO and HOC's Program Director, describes the work they are doing to increase the number of community and school gardens throughout both neighborhoods: All gardening projects include both vegetable gardens and beautiful native pollinator gardens. Youth and families see the gardens as a food source, places for social cohesion and connection, and environmental and conservation learning spaces.



HOC'S COMMUNITY

The Acres Homes and Third Ward communities are both historically Black neighborhoods that have significantly shaped Houston's culture. Residents in both communities have consistently fought against discriminatory disinvestment and displacement from rapid gentrification.



ACRES HOMES, nicknamed the "44" after the #44 METRO bus route that travels through the area, was at one point the largest unincorporated African American community in the Southern United States, a place where Black families could settle with an acre or more of land to care for. Acres Homes residents still have a deep connection to the land – gardens, horses and livestock, wooded areas, and farmer's markets continue to reflect the community's agricultural roots. In recent years, Latine families have also begun to call Acres Homes home and are significantly contributing to the 44's culture.



THIRD WARD, aka "the Tre", was an epicenter of African American economic and cultural life in Houston, built to be a place where Black Americans could raise their families, get an education, attend church, receive medical care, and open and run a business. Houston's Civil Rights Movement was rooted in the churches and universities in Third Ward, which is reflected today in the community's leadership in civic engagement and continued fights for housing and voting rights.

HOC members promote the usage of free, safe, and accessible neighborhood parks/green spaces. The collaborative works collectively to create new ways for community members to spend time outdoors and learn nature-based skills and hobbies in order to "promote good health and wellbeing in children, youth, and families of color in historically undervalued communities." HOC does this by developing fun, informative, community-led programming to encourage residents to spend time outside. The collaborative also equips community members with tools to advocate for local policy change around the accessibility of green spaces and organizes residents to navigate government bureaucracy. Planning, programming, and advocacy is all community-led, inclusive, and collaborative. HOC leaders approach their work with "what's best for the community is by the community."

HEALTHY OUTDOORS, HEALTHY LIFE, HEALTHY COMMUNITY

HOC's work began with the primary goal to get people outside and improve nature and park equity in Acres Homes and Third Ward. It was important to encourage community members to define what the word "park" meant to them, and the word didn't always describe a city or government-maintained park. Through work with residents in both neighborhoods, HOC leaders learned about the ways nature and park equity are inextricably linked with food security, education and economic opportunities, cultural identity, and a sense of safety and belonging, all factors that contribute to a holistically healthy community where the children, youth, and families living there are mentally and physically well. During the first years of the Communities of Care Initiative, HOC gathered insight about their community through focus groups, existing community indicators and assessments, and informal conversations to gather community concerns and strengths, which led to identifying the priorities that their work is grounded in.





trips, and many others. Many HOC-supported projects can be found on their [website](#).

ADVOCACY

HOC is a cornerstone of advancing advocacy in the Acres Homes and Third Ward communities, offering a variety of support to both residents and community groups in their advocacy work. This is exemplified in their efforts to convene and organize Third Ward on Tap, a tactical urbanism project that approaches neighborhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, scalable interventions and policies. At the community's request, HOC contracted with Better Block, a tactical urbanism firm, to provide an in-depth 6-part training series on Tactical Urbanism. With the knowledge and confidence gained from the training, Third Ward community members planned and implemented the first Third Ward on Tap community pop-up event, bringing community awareness to how the Columbia Tap Trail can be utilized as a valuable resource to connect the community.

THE IMPACT OF HOC'S WORK

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS TO CREATE LASTING CHANGE

HOC's strong partnerships with local schools, nonprofit organizations, libraries, faith centers, and neighborhood groups working in outdoor access and conservation has led to innovative programming, robust collaboration, and impactful community work. The collaborative's actions are driven by members' decisions. HOC convenes monthly community meetings where members who live, work, learn, pray, or play in Acres Homes or Third Ward define and decide what community-led projects should be invested in. In the past five years, HOC has supported ongoing projects at approximately fifteen schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) and over twenty community-based organizations, including civic clubs, churches, and small organizations focused on food security, education, literacy, physical fitness, community gardening, family economic security, and more. The projects include outdoor murals uplifting African American and LatinX residents, installing little free libraries, revitalizing community green spaces for gardening and education, hosting outdoor community events like bike rides, festivals, horseback rides, camping

At Third Ward on Tap, residents advocated to local elected officials for improvements to the Columbia Tap Walk & Bike Trail. The project also showcased the positive uses of the trail and historical landmarks along the way, expanded social awareness of the health benefits that can be created through public infrastructure, and got people outside to be in community with their neighbors. The first Third Ward on Tap event was pivotal in the community advocacy along the Columbia Tap Trail and inspired the creation of the Friends of Columbia Tap advocacy group.

The group has successfully advocated for a pocket park near the Cuney Homes public housing complex, the creation of the Dakota's Peace Grove pocket forest, and the preservation of the AIDS Memorial Garden on the Columbia Tap trail. Friends of Columbia Tap also works with other HOC collaborative partners in hosting multiple community events and service projects along the Columbia Tap each year. You can learn more about the work [here](#). Community members and organizations partnered to host the third annual 3rd Ward on Tap community celebration in May 2024, which also served as a grand opening of an ADA accessible ramp connecting two previously



separated sections of Third Ward across the Columbia Tap Trail. For its efforts and leadership, HOC was presented with a Certificate of Recognition by the City of Houston at this event.

Another community group HOC supports, alongside HPB, is the Vogel Creek Community Champions (VCCC). VCCC facilitates various events in that community along the Vogel Creek Greenway Trail. After a long construction and contracting process, the group wanted to showcase the completed trail to the community. As stewards of Vogel Creek Greenway in the Inwood Forest, the group put together community bike rides and walks with large turnouts from the community and over a hundred residents attending each event. VCCC also hosted a special holiday bike ride in partnership with neighboring elementary and high schools.

HOC also regularly partners with Acres Homes Community Advocacy Group (AHCAG), a grassroots organization focused on empowering Acres Homes residents to ensure their neighbors are healthy, housed, and heard. AHCAG facilitates a weekly collection and distribution of events and programming happening in Acres Homes, connecting residents to community organizations and resources. This ongoing communication has ensured local and state government officials are engaged in the events and advocacy happening in the community.

COMMUNITY GARDENS & MEETINGS

HOC is a driving force in creating new and innovative projects in the community and in schools. HOC partners Houston Parks Board

and Nature and Eclectic Outdoors worked with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) to create the [Highland Park Community Garden](#), one of only a handful of community gardens on the City of Houston park grounds and the only one of its kind in Acres Homes. HOC partner organizations are working closely with community members to develop their gardening and organization skills so that the garden can be fully transferred into community hands at the end of HOC's current contract with HPARD. As a Core Team member of HOC and advocate in the Acres Homes community, NEO has partnered with Acres Homes schools to build and sustain seven large school gardens. Other HOC partners have teamed up with NEO to bolster programming and provide additional resources for these schools and their gardening and environmental sciences programs. These gardening projects produced the founding members of the HOC Youth Leadership Council, a group of students and young people in Acres Homes and Third Ward who share voice and leadership in HOC's work.

SEB

"It's important for all urban conversations regarding "green space development" to not simply focus on beautiful trees, grass, and playground equipment. But rather reimagine park spaces in terms of equity in programming activities. That's what urban parks need in order to be impactful to their communities." - Sharon Evans-Brooks, Third Ward resident and first-round HOC CEL

EH

“When residents see community leaders volunteering and being active in the community, it encourages others to get involved and create changes.” - Erica Harris

KJ

“Healthy Outdoor Communities is set up to enhance the living experience for all residents. Projects are sustainable and will have a positive effect on how residents utilize outdoor spaces. Success is the legacy HOC will leave!” - Kirk Jackson (1959 - 2021), Third Ward resident and activist and first-round HOC CEL before passing

**DW,
M.D**

“It’s wonderful to have a heart for change, but without the proper tools, it’s just another wish or hope. HOC stands out I work. They are doing the research and working hands-on with projects to make sure they work.” - Dr. Donna Whitelow, Acres Homes resident and first-round HOC CEL

Furthermore, HOC is dedicated to removing system-level barriers to the outdoors for their communities. HOC members organized a Communities & Parks Convening in December 2023 to foster discussion between community members, government agencies, schools, businesses, and nonprofits about outdoor equity and resident empowerment. HOC members’ goals with these types of events are to build relationships and establish clear lines of communication between community members and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD), establish strong participation in park events amongst Harris County Commissioner offices, and advocate to HPARD around the cumbersome permitting process for utilizing city parks.

A CHAMPION IN CENTERING COMMUNITY

The collaboration between residents, community organizations, and government institutions, as well as HOC’s investment in their passionate residents and community groups is the key to the overarching success of their work.

As the collaborative continues to grow and increase the visibility of park and green space access issues, community residents remain the main source of power and strategy creation for the collaborative. Strategies like capacity building for advocacy, relationship and trust-building, and investment are vital for HOC to continue engaging and lifting up strong voices in marginalized communities, creating avenues for disenfranchised groups to take power back into their own hands. By making the connection between parks and green space equity and mental health and well-being for families, Healthy Outdoor Communities has made roots for long-term, transformational changes in the Acres Homes and Third Ward areas and beyond.



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