

The Legacy and Leadership of the Center for Health Promotion and Health Equity (CHPHE)

ALISON TOVAR, PhD, MPH

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the Center for Health Promotion and Health Equity (CHPHE) at the Brown University School of Public Health has emerged as a national leader in equity-centered research, education, and community engagement. The Center's story began decades earlier, built on pioneering work in community-based health interventions that would shape the field of public health in Rhode Island and beyond.

DEEP ROOTS: THE PAWTUCKET HEART HEALTH PROGRAM AND EARLY COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

CHPHE's legacy dates back to 1980 with the launch of the groundbreaking Pawtucket Heart Health Program, a landmark cardiovascular disease prevention initiative led by Thomas Lasater, PhD, and Kim M. Gans, PhD, MPH, LDN. As one of the first federally funded, community-wide health promotion studies in the U.S., the project helped define how public health could be practiced with communities, not just in them.¹⁻¹⁰

From this foundation emerged a growing research group at the Center for Primary Care and Prevention at Memorial Hospital of Rhode Island, where Drs. Lasater and Gans continued to collaborate on numerous community-based intervention studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Their work laid the groundwork for what would become a dedicated research center committed to improving public health through culturally informed, equity-centered approaches.

BECOMING A CENTER: FOUNDING CHPHE (2002)

In 2002, the group officially became a center in the Brown University Program in Public Health, originally named the Institute for Community Health Promotion (ICHP). It was founded by Director Dr. Lasater and Deputy Director Dr. Gans, alongside founding faculty members Catherine Dubé, EdD, and Patricia Risica, DrPH. This designation recognized the team's growing impact in community health research and set the stage for broader interdisciplinary collaboration within Brown and the surrounding communities.

Since its founding, the Center has evolved through several identity shifts, reflecting its expanding scope and mission:

- ICHP (2002–early 2010s): Emphasized chronic disease prevention and health promotion through community-based interventions.
- Center for Health Equity Research (CHER): Signaled a growing focus on addressing structural and social determinants of health disparities.
- Center for Health Promotion and Health Equity (CHPHE, 2020–present): Represents the Center's current mission, improving health and advancing equity through community-engaged research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and advocacy on multiple levels.

A MILESTONE MOMENT: INTEGRATING INTO THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (2013)

In 2013, when Brown formally launched its School of Public Health, the Center was already a vital part of its research and community engagement ecosystem. CHPHE's presence helped shape the School's emphasis on population health, health equity, and applied, interdisciplinary science.

Over the next decade, CHPHE grew into a vibrant hub of faculty, staff, students, and community partners committed to addressing the root causes of health inequities, from racism and poverty to food insecurity and environmental injustice.

NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS FROM 2013–2023

CHPHE has led a diverse portfolio of high-impact research and community programs. Highlights include:

Structural Discrimination and Health Inequities

Research led by Madina Agénor, ScD, MPH, describes how structural racism, measured through racially discriminatory laws and interpersonal discrimination in healthcare settings contribute to higher rates of premature death and limited access to preventive services and health insurance among Black, Latine, and LGBTQ+ communities.¹¹⁻¹⁵ These intersecting barriers underscore the need for structural, community-driven approaches to health promotion and equity.

Green Space and Child Health

Results from Project Green Space, led by Diana Grigsby-Toussaint, PhD, show that access to parks and other green spaces supports children's mental health, cognitive development, sleep, and physical activity. Using GPS tracking, parent surveys, memory tasks, and biological markers of stress, this research is uncovering how environmental exposures—like neighborhood greenery—can promote well-being, especially among children in historically marginalized communities.¹⁶⁻²²

Similarly, another project is exploring how exposure to greenspace during pregnancy affects birth outcomes. In a multidisciplinary study bridging public health, medicine, and geography, one study is investigating how exposure to greenspace during pregnancy affects birth outcomes. By exploring different measures of greenspace exposure and their relation to maternal well-being, this research seeks to clarify mechanisms and improve environmental health equity, particularly in vulnerable populations.

Promoting Physical Activity Among Latinas Through Technology

A study, led by Tanya Benitez, PhD, MSW, found that a culturally tailored, Spanish-language intervention combining a website and text messaging significantly increased physical activity among insufficiently active Latinas over 24 months. The enhanced intervention, featuring personalized text reminders, gamified engagement, and community support, led to greater long-term gains in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity than the original version. This approach offers a scalable model for addressing persistent disparities in chronic disease prevention through sustained health promotion.²³⁻²⁶

Testing Incentives to Promote Physical Activity

A randomized trial, led by Lauren Bohlen, PhD, and David Williams, PhD, is evaluating the effectiveness of insurance-based financial incentives (such as \$100–200 reimbursements for gym visits) in increasing physical activity. The study compares gain-framed (rewards earned) and loss-framed (rewards withheld) incentive structures, with preliminary findings exploring how framing, habit formation, and anticipated regret influence sustained exercise behavior. This research informs how health plans and policy can use behavioral economics to promote physical activity at scale.²⁷

Preventing Stimulant-Involved Overdose Deaths

As fentanyl contamination fuels a deadly “fourth wave” of the opioid crisis, research led by Jaclyn White Hughto, PhD, MPH, highlights that over 60% of surveyed stimulant users unknowingly consumed fentanyl-laced drugs. The Preventing Overdoses Involving Stimulants (POINTS) study identifies critical gaps in awareness and intervention, underscoring

the need for harm reduction tools like fentanyl test strips and community drug checking. Community-informed strategies from this work are shaping local overdose prevention efforts and advancing equitable public health responses.²⁸

Evaluating a Statewide Fruit and Vegetable Incentive Program

Early evaluation, led by Alison Tovar, PhD, of Eat Well, Be Well, Rhode Island's first statewide SNAP fruit incentive program, found no overall change in fruit and vegetable intake among participants. However, the program showed promising effects among individuals with higher baseline fruit and vegetable consumption. These findings highlight the importance of refining implementation strategies, increasing incentive amounts, and expanding outreach and nutrition education to improve equity and impact among lower-consuming SNAP recipients.²⁹

Resilience Among African American/Black Adults Living with HIV

In a collaborative study led by former CHPHE faculty Akilah Dulin, PhD, and others, researchers used concept mapping to explore multilevel resilience resources among African American/Black adults living with HIV in the southern U.S. The study identified 12 clusters of resilience resources, ranging from personal strengths to neighborhood conditions, and found high consistency across different demographic and environmental contexts. Published in 2020, the study underscores the importance of culturally and contextually informed interventions, with the potential to guide future HIV care strategies that center the lived experiences and strengths of Black communities.³⁰

Housing, Homeownership, and Health: Dulin's Study

In a compelling examination of long-standing structural inequalities, Dr. Dulin's work explored how Black homeownership relates to self-rated health, offering nuanced evidence of disparities in the benefits associated with housing investment across racial groups. Specifically, findings revealed that although homeownership generally conferred better self-rated health, this advantage was smaller, but still significant, for Black homeowners compared to their White counterparts.³¹

GRANT-FUNDED EXCELLENCE

CHPHE faculty have brought in over \$10 million in competitive Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funding, and Foundations such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation among others, and in the past three years, reflecting both scientific excellence and deep community partnerships.

CONTINUING IMPACT: PROGRAMS THAT LAST

CHPHE's long-standing programs remain active and impactful. Other early programs such as SisterTalk, a culturally tailored weight-control intervention for Black women, continue to inform health-promotion strategies in diverse populations.³²

LOOKING AHEAD: EQUITY AS A PUBLIC HEALTH IMPERATIVE

Now more than two decades since its founding and four decades since its roots in Pawtucket, CHPHE continues to grow as a dynamic and collaborative force, grounded in science, justice, and community. Whether through pioneering research on greenspace and health, deep partnerships addressing chronic disease and food insecurity, or empowering communities impacted by HIV, CHPHE's work remains at the forefront of efforts to build a healthier, more equitable future for all.

References

- Elder JP, McGraw SA, Abrams DB, et al. Organizational and community approaches to community-wide prevention of heart disease: The first two years of the Pawtucket Heart Health Program. *Prev Med.* 1986;15(2):107-117. doi:10.1016/0091-7435(86)90081-2
- Lefebvre RC, Lasater TM, Carleton RA, Peterson GS. Theory and delivery of health programming in the community: the Pawtucket Heart Health Program. *Prev Med.* 1987;16(1):80-95. doi:10.1016/0091-7435(87)90008-9
- Assaf AR, Carleton RA. The Pawtucket Heart Health Program: II. Evaluation strategies. *R I Med J.* 1987;70(12):541-546.
- Carleton RA, Lasater TM, Assaf AR, Lefebvre RC, McKinlay SM. The Pawtucket Heart Health Program: I. An experiment in population-based disease prevention. *R I Med J.* 1987;70(12):533-538.
- Carleton RA, Lasater TM, Assaf AR, Feldman HA, McKinlay SM. The Pawtucket Heart Health Program: community changes in cardiovascular risk factors and projected disease risk. *Am J Public Health.* 1995;85(6):777-785. doi:10.2105/AJPH.85.6.777
- Hunt MK, Lefebvre RC, Hixson ML, et al. Pawtucket Heart Health Program point-of-purchase nutrition education program in supermarkets. *Am J Public Health.* 1990;80(6):730-732. doi:10.2105/AJPH.80.6.730
- Eaton CB, Lapane KL, Garber CE, et al. Effects of a community-based intervention on physical activity: the Pawtucket Heart Health Program. *Am J Public Health.* 1999;89(11):1741-1744. doi:10.2105/AJPH.89.11.1741
- Gans KM, Bain SL, Plotkin B, Lasater TM, Carleton RA. Implementation and institutionalization of heart health programming in schools: The Pawtucket Heart Health Program experience. *J Health Educ.* 1994;25(2):89-96.
- Gans KM, Lapane KL, Lasater TM, Carleton RA. Effects of intervention on compliance to referral and lifestyle recommendations given at cholesterol screening programs. *Am J Prev Med.* 1994;10(5):275-282.
- Lefebvre RC, Lasater TM, Carleton RA, Peterson G. The process of stimulating community change: The Pawtucket Heart Health Program. *Scand J Prim Health Care Suppl.* 1988;1:31-37.
- Agénor M, Zubizarreta D, Beccia AL, et al. Structural Racism-Related State Laws and Healthcare Access Among Black, Latine, and White U.S. Adults. *J Racial Ethn Health Disparities.* 2025;12(3):1432-1445. doi:10.1007/s40615-024-01976-4
- Agénor M, Perkins C, Stamoulis C, et al. Developing a Database of Structural Racism-Related State Laws for Health Equity Research and Practice in the United States. *Public Health Rep.* 2021;136(4):428-440. doi:10.1177/0033354920984168
- Jahn JL, Zubizarreta D, Chen JT, et al. Legislating inequity: structural racism in groups of state laws and associations with premature mortality rates. *Health Aff (Millwood).* 2023;42(10):1325-1333. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2023.00471
- Noh M, Mehta N, Kim C, et al. Association between health care discrimination and medical mistrust among Black assigned female at birth adults with minoritized sexual and gender identities in the United States. *LGBT Health.* 2025;12(5):340-349. doi:10.1089/lgbt.2024.0263 pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov+1
- Singh S, Mehta N, Noh M, et al. Weight-based health care discrimination and cervical cancer screening among Black sexual and gender minoritized assigned female at birth adults in the United States. *Health Equity.* 2025;9(1):22-30. doi:10.1089/heq.2024.0158. PubMed Central+2MDSOAR+2
- Rodriguez Acevedo A, Story D, Werner L, et al. Associations between objectively and subjectively measured sleep outcomes among elementary school children in Rhode Island. *Front Pediatr.* 2025;13:1622943. doi:10.3389/fped.2025.1622943
- Guo Y, Wu D, Zuo X. Urban green spaces and public health: legal challenges and policy opportunities in green city governance. *Front Public Health.* 2025;13:1620076. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2025.1620076
- Ury B, Yang J, Rosenthal SR, et al. Associations between subjective and objective green space on children's mental health and cognitive function. *Urban For Urban Green.* 2025;81:129156. doi:10.1016/j.ufug.2025.129156
- Nwanaji-Enwerem U, McGeary JE, Grigsby-Toussaint DS. Greenspace, stress, and health: how is epigenetics involved?. *Front Public Health.* 2024;12:1333737. Published 2024 Feb 16. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2024.1333737
- Grigsby-Toussaint DS, Shin JC. COVID-19, green space exposure, and mask mandates. *Sci Total Environ.* 2022;836:155302. doi:10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.155302
- Thakkar I, Blachford S, Hall M. Can green spaces make you happier? *The Public's Radio.* May 13, 2025. <https://thepublics-radio.org/environment/can-green-spaces-make-you-happier/>. Accessed November 11, 2025.
- Grigsby-Toussaint DS, Shin JC, Acevedo AR, et al. Project G-SPACE: protocol for exploring the influence of green space on sleep and mental health among children. *BMC Pediatr.* 2024;24:783. doi:10.1186/s12887-024-05247-3
- Benitez TJ, Cherrington A, Joseph RP, et al. Using web-based technology to promote physical activity in Latinas: Results of the Muévete Alabama pilot study. *Comput Inform Nurs.* 2015;33(7):315-324. doi:10.1097/CIN.0000000000000162
- Benitez TJ, Artigas E, Larsen B, et al. Barriers and Facilitators to Muscle-Strengthening Activity Among Latinas in the U.S.: Results From Formative Research Assessments. *Int J Behav Med.* 2024;31(2):292-304. doi:10.1007/s12529-023-10183-0
- Benitez TJ, Brown N, Marcus B, Sanchez A, Von Ash T, Joseph RP. Promotion of Muscle-Strengthening Activity Among Latina and Black/African American Women: A Review of Literature. *Am J Lifestyle Med.* Published online April 17, 2024. doi:10.1177/15598276241246734
- Benitez TJ, Dunsiger S, Marquez B, Larsen B, Pekmezi D, Marcus BH. Increases in Muscle-Strengthening Activities Among Latinas in Seamos Saludables. *Health Educ Behav.* 2022;49(3):446-454. doi:10.1177/10901981221074908

27. Williams DM, Bohlen LC, Dunsiger S, et al. Testing an insurance-based monetary incentive program for exercise: RCT design and rationale. *Contemp Clin Trials*. 2023;135:107382. doi:10.1016/j.cct.2023.107382
28. Hughto JMW, Rich JD, Kelly PJA, et al. Preventing overdoses involving stimulants: the POINTS study protocol. *BMC Public Health*. 2024;24:2325. doi:10.1186/s12889-024-19779-x
29. Tovar A, Powell LM, Leider J, Elenio E, Oddo VM, Vadiveloo MK. Evaluation of a State-Level Incentive Program to Improve Diet. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2025 Nov 3;8(11):e2544215
30. Dulin AJ, Earnshaw VA, Dale SK, et al. A Concept Mapping Study to Understand Multilevel Resilience Resources Among African American/Black Adults Living with HIV in the Southern United States. *AIDS Behav*. 2021;25(3):773-786. doi:10.1007/s10461-020-03042-6
31. Dulin A, Starks K, Yago M, Dennis K. The State of Black Rhode Island: Homeownership Report. United Way of Rhode Island; June 2022. <https://www.unitedwayri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/State-of-Black-RI-Home-Ownership-Report-June2022.pdf>
32. Evans EW, Lyerly R, Gans KM, et al. Translating Research-Funded Mobile Produce Market Trials Into Sustained Public Health Programs : Food on the Move. *Public Health Rep*. 2022;137(3):425-430. doi:10.1177/00333549211012409

Author

Alison Tovar, PhD, MPH, Associate Professor of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Brown University School of Public Health; Interim Director of the Center for Health Promotion and Health Equity, Providence, RI.

Disclosures

The author has nothing to disclose.

Correspondence

Alison Tovar, PhD, MPH
 Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences
 Brown University School of Public Health
 Box G-S121-4
 Providence, RI 02912
alison_tovar@brown.edu