



Evolving into Shared Governing Power:

Central Providence Unidos and the Roadmap to Co-Governance



A Place, Policy, and Power Case Study
August 2026

Race Forward's Place, Policy, and Power (3P) department presents this case study to offer a window into a process that tapped into the collective power of communities, local agencies and government to lead for health equity and racial justice in Providence, Rhode Island.

Our Work

3P works with partners from across the country to change how decisions get made in communities. We help forge the relationships, skills, and infrastructure that strengthens community and government leaders' ability to work together in real partnership — creating governance beyond government and democracy beyond elections. We support leaders and organizations who are accountable to communities of color who have been harmed by systemic racism and are committed to building real governing power in place. It's not about just helping to change policies; it's about changing who's at the table, how decisions are made, and how solutions get implemented with communities, not for them. When we do our work well, people see and feel material change in their lives, communities have more say over what happens where they live, and the broader movement for racial justice feels more connected and clear on what works so victories can spread.

Our Challenge

Too often, the way we make decisions, develop policy, and govern excludes the very people who have the most at stake, producing limited wins that fail to address the systemic root causes of racialized inequality. This leaves communities in a cycle of disappointment and broken civic trust that feeds a narrative of hopelessness and lack of belief that change is possible. However, we know that change is possible and it's happening in big and small ways everyday across our country. Communities are rewriting the rules of governance, moving from transactional relationships to structures that sustain collaborative partnerships rooted in shared accountability and community agency. This is why our work focuses on transforming the practices and culture of governance, across the “whole of government” and civic formations — centering communities of color in building the durable multiracial democracy that can serve us all. We hope this case study helps to illustrate how this happens.

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Co-governance, where communities and government work in tandem, calls for sharing power and centering community leadership. That power must center people who are most harmed by structural racism and systems of inequity. Easier said than done, though! As you read this case study about the work of Central Providence Unidos, consider what lessons it offers to the following questions: How do coalitions build shared power when individuals come with different backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences? How can they move toward a shared governance model and break the inequitable systems all are so used to?



Over the last ten years, One Neighborhood Builders (ONB) convened a Health Equity Zone to improve health outcomes in Central Providence, Rhode Island. After this decade of work, ONB and its 60+ partner organizations (now called Central Providence Unidos) built an impressive shared governing power system. According to the coalition, there are three steps that can help build shared power:

- I. Get the right people at the table**
- II. Try something together**
- III. Iterate on it**

Together, with essential financial support from both the State of Rhode Island's Department of Health (RIDOH) and private sources, the ONB-convened coalition launched a multi-year campaign that involved creating a vision and roadmap for Central Providence. The campaign endorsed and created a policy platform, and a \$1 million participatory budgeting effort for place-based initiatives in the region.

“A chorus can sing a note forever because people can stagger their breathing — that’s what we’ve tried to build...a decision-making power so diffuse that it’s ok for individuals to be there or not and the work continues.”

—
**Lucy Berman, Former Assistant Director of
Collective Impact at One Neighborhood Builders**

I. Get the right people at the table



Central Providence is diverse and includes nine of the city’s 25 neighborhoods. Of the more than 84,000 residents who call those nine neighborhoods home, 54% identify as Hispanic/Latino and 16% as Black. Residents are more likely to be renters, and health indicators — including asthma rates, lead exposure, and health insurance coverage — are worse in Central Providence than in other areas of the city. For these reasons, in 2015, when Governor Lincoln Chaffee launched the Health Equity Zone (HEZ) program, Olneyville was one of the first places selected. ONB was selected as the backbone organization supporting the neighborhood as part of a collective impact model¹).

The goal of the HEZ was to “promote economic opportunity and empower the community through resident leadership trainings and supporting community-based organizations.”² Early days of the HEZ work involved a lot of programming, relationship building, and convening. In 2018, the HEZ expanded to include three nearby neighborhoods, thus forming the Central Providence HEZ.

¹ Kania, John, et. al. “Centering Equity in Collective Impact.” (Winter 2022). Stanford Social Innovation Review
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_equity_in_collective_impact

² Central Providence Roadmap Introduction 2023-2032 (Published March 2023) Central Providence Opportunities, a Health Equity Zone
<https://centralprovidenceunidos.org/roadmap-sections/introduction/>

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Due to both on-the-ground learnings from the early work in Olneyville and the growing size of the coalition, which eventually became 60 organizations and hundreds of individuals, it became clear that there needed to be a shared vision of health and economic equity to organize around. Launching a community-led effort like this was made possible through a private \$8 million place-based grant, which allowed ONB to add additional staff to support this significant effort. Importantly, part of the grant required the establishment of a Resident Advisory Council or RAC (made up of people living in Central Providence) to inform the work.

II. Try something together

“Our goal was to create a plan and a way to operationalize a shared vision for health/economic outcomes in Providence that materially improves life for residents here and to involve those residents and organizations in that process.”

—
**Anusha Venkataraman, Former Managing
Director of Central Providence Unidos**



With the team together and the goal clear, it was time to try building shared power. The growing coalition decided to build a Roadmap for Central Providence, complete with a shared vision, theory of change, and three major pillars.³ This roadmap included not just immediate relief for community needs, but also a longer-term vision for systemic transformation. But how do you make decisions in a group so large and diverse?

³ Central Providence Roadmap 2023-2032 (Published March 2023) *Central Providence Opportunities, a Health Equity Zone*
<https://oneneighborhoodbuilders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ONB-Final-Report-032423-Web.pdf>

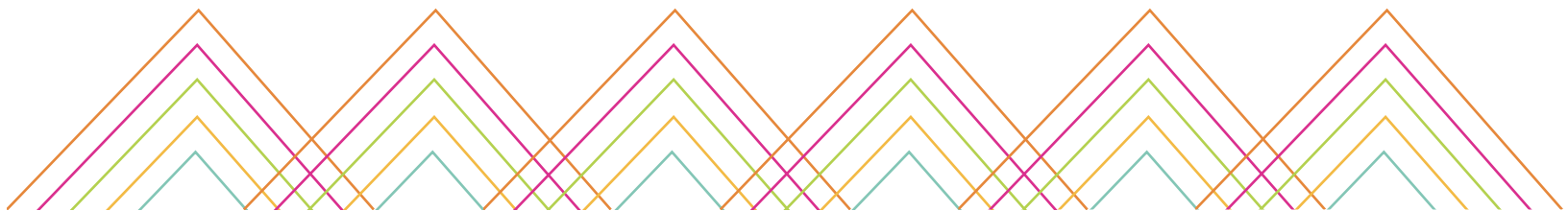
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Early on, the RAC was structured as an advisory committee to the steering committee, offering feedback, community perspective, etc. This structure of some decisions being made by the RAC and some still being made by a steering committee caused confusion and some tension over which body made which decisions.

By 2020 and 2021, some ONB staff pushed to give more power to the RAC, starting with giving them partial budget allocation. The team ultimately gave the RAC authority over how to spend a portion of the overall funds: \$100,400. The 16 RAC members chose to develop a “Community Impact Fund” which disbursed \$5,000 microgrants to creative, community-driven projects aligned to the goals of the HEZ.⁴ Some example projects include a fence around a childcare center, an expanded tool set for the library to loan out, and a community healing/storytelling project.

The ONB team used their learnings from this pilot to advise the State of Rhode Island on how to develop its own participatory budgeting strategy. Ultimately, the state granted ONB \$450,000, and ONB matched it with \$550,000 of private grant funds for a total \$1M participatory budgeting process to improve health and well-being in Central Providence. This became (and remains) the state’s largest known participatory budgeting effort. For governance of this larger process, the team centered shared decision-making and power from the beginning: from ideas, to ballot design, to the vote itself, all members shared the decision-making authority. The decision-making body, called the Nine Neighborhood Fund Steering Committee, was made up of individuals who work, live, or learn in the nine neighborhoods of Central Providence. In collaboration with the staff at ONB, the group designed the rules that guided the process, selection and engagement. More than 1,200 Central Providence residents ages 13 and older voted in June 2023 on how to spend the funds. Winning projects included things such as public bathrooms in parks, filters for homes with lead service lines, and bike distribution and repair for low-income residents.⁵

After the energy and success of this vote, the team realized they should and could take the shared power structure from the participatory budgeting project and redesign the daily structure of the HEZ to provide RAC members not just separate authority over discrete pots of funds/projects, but a greater shared power structure into the entire organization, particularly as they shifted to additional advocacy work. Another important impetus is that for organizational partners to be fully bought into and see themselves as critical implementers of the vision, strategies, and outcomes in the Roadmap (i.e., for it to be truly shared/collective rather than led by ONB), they needed to be at the decision-making table as well.



⁴ One Neighborhood Builders Press Release. “Resident Advisory Council Awards \$100,400 in Community Impact Award Grants.” 15 September 2021 <https://oneneighborhoodbuilders.org/resident-advisory-council-awards-100400-in-community-impact-fund-grants/>

⁵ “Nine Neighborhood Fund: Central Providence Opportunities 02908-02909.” DecideRI <https://decideri.org/processes/cpo/f/28/>

III. Iterate on it

“We had had an HEZ for years, and over that time, we said it was community-led, but it hadn’t actually been. We did a community needs assessment to make sure programs/activities were responsive to community needs, but that was the only “community leadership” of the HEZ. We needed a way to build a functional, shared-power structure.”

—
**Lucy Berman, Former Assistant Director of
Collective Impact at One Neighborhood Builders**



From the beginning of the HEZ effort, community leadership had been a core value that all parties believed essential to success. Originally, the initial governing body for the coalition was a Steering Committee for the HEZ formed in Summer 2023. It was composed of mostly nonprofit organizational partners (relatively senior-level individuals such as executive directors and program directors) as well as a few residents. The initial rationale for the RAC being outside the steering committee structure was partially so there was a shared space that was just for residents to ensure they could share honest feedback without fear of funder/other consequences, and partially for logistical reasons. Residents often have other jobs that mean they can’t make 9a-5p meeting times, and the ONB team continued to need legal, financial, and other professional expertise that other members provided.

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Over time, the team's thinking about community leadership evolved, and they recognized that while well-intentioned, this separate structure ultimately wasn't true community leadership if the residents were not always at the decision-making table and not given the opportunity to learn from those experts.

In 2023, Race Forward co-facilitated a power analysis conversation with ONB staff and their housing work group, which surfaced the power imbalance of the current governance structure. This recognition of the power imbalance led to two actions: first, direct partnerships with grassroots housing organizers and tenants' unions in the region, and second, the decision to host a Governance Retreat in 2024.

The goal of the retreat was to incorporate the needed professional capacity and expertise alongside RAC members and Steering Committee members in a collective decision-making body, while also ensuring the RAC had space to meet separately to address the power imbalance. At the retreat, the team created a new Executive Committee (EC) composed of at least 50% residents and no more than 50% members from the former steering committee. This body meets quarterly and is where collective decisions are made such as updating roadmap content, deciding whether to join a coalition, endorsing a long-term campaign, etc. A quorum is met at the EC if at least 51% of the people present are Central Providence members (either a RAC member or a resident leader who serves as a strategic advisor). 3 of the RAC must be present to meet quorum, and 2 of strategic advisors must be present. The team chose this quorum structure instead of consensus to ensure that resident voice was always dominant, but that the structure didn't outweigh 1-2 individual opinions. The RAC continues to meet monthly just amongst themselves, which maintains the smaller space of trust. Monthly RAC meetings are for event planning, community and relationship building, leadership development, examining data, leadership development, resource sharing, and giving feedback on day-to-day needs. Members have 3-year term limits to serve on the RAC and EC.

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Importantly, the ONB Board of Directors and leadership supported this proposal, and as long as they were kept apprised of what is happening, they and the rest of the partners involved strongly supported this power shift. At the time, other nonprofit partners celebrated this transition and credited the role of ONB as a backbone organization as essential to the transition.

With this new shared power governance system in hand, the EC decided to revisit the roadmap they had just published two years ago, ultimately leading to the renaming of the HEZ to “Central Providence Unidos.” After Race Forward’s support with both equity and root cause analyses, the group reformed some existing roadmap policy priorities and established new ones. This updated roadmap, published in May 2025, provided a stronger foundation that’s a lot more systems-change oriented, focused on root cause and racial equity. The alignment of priorities gave the coalition an opportunity to practice coordinated advocacy, including new anti-displacement policies in the city’s comprehensive plan to secure technical assistance resources to conduct an equity analysis of the city’s building code enforcement program.

The new EC structure also led the coalition to endorse its first policy platform as a coalition. The working groups focused on specific topics and elevated five recommendations for each issue area (housing, education, etc.) to the committee. This process led to 10 legislative priorities to mobilize the full coalition around, two of which were signed into law.⁶

This policy platform feels like a culmination of all our work because it's so core to our purpose as a collaborative to show up for each other's fights, and we can't do that if we don't have clarity on what our shared platform is. Part of our theory of change is that we can't win these fights if we go out on our own, but no structure had existed before this to help us get to a shared platform."

—

**Shelby Mack, Former Assistant Director of
Collective Impact at One Neighborhood Builders**

Conclusion

The ten-year evolution from the Olneyville HEZ to the Central Providence Unidos demonstrates the time it takes to do co-governance efforts well, but also the importance of getting started even when things aren't perfect. Even before they built their shared governance structure, this coalition produced a number of accomplishments. The humility and willingness of staff and coalition partners to revisit and revise not only their work, but how they work together, is what led them to create their co-governance structure. This journey stands as an exemplar for the nation in the power of iteration. The evolution of CPU continues; after a decade of being supported by ONB, CPU transitioned out of the organization. Through the dedicated work of the Executive Council, the coalition has found a new home with the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, where the coalition will continue to lead transformational change.

Connections? Questions? Ideas?

We are eager to hear from you, so please stay connected!
Visit our webpage at: www.raceforward.org/place-based
Email us at: place-based@raceforward.org

