



DREAM 77021

Since 2019, DREAM 77021 has played a key role in community empowerment, preservation, and transformation in the Old Spanish Trail/South Union (OST/South Union) neighborhood of southeast Houston, Texas.

Since the inception of the DREAM 77021 Collaborative, a dedicated core team has worked alongside a robust network of partners, including Missionary Village Apartments, Air Alliance Houston, Neighborhood Recovery Community Development Corporation, Agape Development, U.S. Dream Academy, Southeast Houston Transformation Alliance, and Can Do Houston.

Embracing the Community of Care Initiative's focus on addressing the upstream drivers of mental wellbeing as a guiding framework, DREAM 77021 is committed to honoring and empowering the community to work toward a neighborhood where residents "feel safer, happier, and more comfortable." The collaborative has tackled pressing issues in the community, such as illegal dumping, lack of adequate trash removal, poor air quality, crime hotspots, inadequate infrastructure, disconnectedness, and other drivers of health inequities. Rooted in the belief that real change stems from community-driven advocacy, DREAM has consistently worked to support

residents of the 77021 zip code to find their voice and actively shape their community environment.

Throughout its five-year journey, DREAM 77021 has remained steadfast in its commitment to improving community wellbeing. Its adaptability to new learnings and changing community conditions has allowed DREAM to focus on its values of centering community needs and community empowerment while working towards improved health outcomes for the OST/South Union neighborhood.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

OST/South Union's predominantly African American/Black and Latine residents, and communities of color more broadly, have historically been excluded from conversations about neighborhood vitality, wellbeing, and policy priorities. DREAM's efforts to understand the community's needs through actively seeking out residents' voices shifted this norm. It was a pivotal part of designing the vision for and proposing community change in 77021. Authentically engaging youth and families to understand the community environment through the unpredictable landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic showed true adaptability.



THE OST/SOUTH UNION NEIGHBORHOOD,

located close to Houston's Downtown and Medical Center neighborhoods, is a diverse area with a rich cultural history. As a predominantly Black community with a growing Latine population, there has long been a shared sense of community and cultural identity. Despite the challenges of gentrification and displacement, the community is resilient and determined to preserve OST/South Union's historic and cultural identity.



"We embraced the concept that community conditions are what impact a person's feelings about themselves, about their wellbeing, about their safety," says Linda Bass, Collaborative Coordinator, sharing insight on the approach DREAM 77021 takes to advancing health and wellbeing. "Daily life, health, and wellbeing is not just whether you individually feel well. But it's about how you feel when you look out your door, step out your door, and have to go to work and school, and all of those things that impact you that way." - Linda Bass



In 2020, the collaborative carried out a robust community assessment with residents of eight different apartment complexes in the 77021 zip code. Among these were low- to moderate-income residents from Missionary Village Apartments and a building with mixed-income residents and college students. The THRIVE assessment process involved ongoing, proactive engagement with youth and residents to understand their needs, concerns, and aspirations for the neighborhood. Residents had a chance to rate the OST/South Union community on neighborhood assets such as community trust and connection, housing, built environment, economic development, and health. The outcomes of this assessment provided valuable insights into the community's perceptions of health, safety, and wellbeing priorities, as well as their desires for community transformation, which have since guided DREAM 77021's work.

Though the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed and impacted progress on identified priorities, DREAM's staff prioritized safely engaging with residents in person, with masks and physical distancing. DREAM 77021's staff members and volunteers set up tents outside the apartment buildings and approached residents to complete surveys, offering assistance as needed. Rather than canceling their work or shifting to impersonal data collection methods, DREAM 77021's staff effectively balanced dual goals of maintaining safety and gathering high-quality resident input. This approach emphasized to residents the value of their voice and helped build trusting relationships with DREAM 77021 staff.

Dr. LouAnn Pepper, a long-time partner of DREAM 77021 and social services coordinator from Missionary Village Apartments, witnessed how this in-depth assessment approach allowed residents to share their voices when they typically wouldn't have the opportunity to do so. "Our residents, who maybe for years had never felt like they had a platform to launch their voice, to share their opinions, were given an opportunity," she remarked. "[DREAM was] being very intentional about speaking with residents, fleshing out their cares and their concerns and their hopes and their dreams."



In the assessment process, 90% of surveyed residents indicated air, water, and soil quality as a top priority for the OST/South Union neighborhood. In partnership with Air Alliance Houston, DREAM's early activities included distributing air quality monitors and training residents to assess levels of air pollution and advocate for improved quality and access to clean air. Continuous conversations in recent years took place to reaffirm community priorities, where DREAM staff also identified illegal dumping, a lack of speed cushions, and crime hot spots near corner stores as opportunities to advocate for change.

"This was an opportunity for us to embark on an empowerment process, not only for us, but for the residents. You have a community that historically feels powerless," says Wythel Rogers, DREAM Outreach and Evaluation Coordinator. Reflecting on the importance of DREAM 77021's community assessment process, she said, "Most times, when you develop programs, they fail because you don't involve the people who are most impacted. So this was another opportunity to change that."

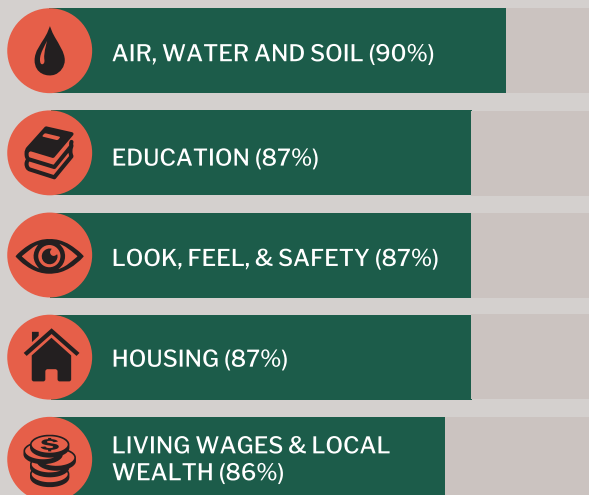
By maintaining a continued presence in the community, the collaborative remains adaptable in responding to long-term issues and the emerging priorities identified by 77021's residents.

RESIDENT EMPOWERMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Early in their work, DREAM 77021 also recognized the essential role of building resident capacity to effect systems change and community transformation.

As part of their efforts to address air quality and safety in the neighborhood, DREAM 77021 partnered with Air Alliance Houston to better

TOP 5 PRIORITIES



Surveying the Community: DREAM 77021's community assessment identified some of community factors that are amongst OST/South Union residents' top five priorities to address. Residents had the opportunity to select from 12 factors included in Prevention Institute's THRIVE framework. THRIVE describes 12 factors in the socio-cultural, built, and economic environment influencing health and safety and promoting health equity.

assess how to advocate for environmental justice. DREAM supported an air monitoring bike ride and community walk with Houston BCycle, which gathered residents to collectively monitor neighborhood air quality and identify opportunities to advocate for clean air. In further analysis and community walkthroughs, residents advocated for regulations on nearby landfills and dumping sites, which are thought to cause the release of volatile chemicals that can harm health with long-term exposure.

Recognizing the effectiveness and need for training and capacity building to empower residents to make change, DREAM 77021 partnered with Can-Do Houston to provide concrete workshops that taught advocacy skills and community mobilization strategies. Through these trainings, more residents have become involved in neighborhood strategy conversations and were invited to work with decision-makers in Houston City Council District D.



Joan Alexander, a resident leader, says, “One of the things I’ve realized, working with the community and with DREAM, is that there’s empowerment that individuals get, knowing that their voices can make a difference.”



Milton Guardado, a partner at GO Neighborhoods for OST/South Union, describes how DREAM 77021’s work advances capacity and sustainability in community projects, stating that partners, including DREAM, “really want to see the community grow. We want to see the community flourish. We want to see the community see leaders from within.”



LouAnn Pepper, a social services provider at Missionary Village Apartments, shares that DREAM’s focus groups built a foundation for hearing from the teens at Missionary Village Apartment Complex, stating, “We got to hear their concerns and where they want to go...I think a lot of the sustainability is with the youth voice.”

As they forged relationships with residents throughout their work, DREAM 77021 has begun to convene 12 resident leaders to serve as “equity warriors” for their community. These equity warriors identify and address equity issues within the neighborhood— they conduct analyses of proposed laws to ensure their City Council has adequately considered equity implications. Regularly attending City Council budget meetings in person and remotely helps facilitate the equity warriors’ impact. A central motto of the effort is “If you see something, say something, and take it a step further and do something,” reflecting DREAM’s commitment to community empowerment and resident involvement.

Rogers comments on some of her proudest moments building resident engagement among people who have often been excluded from decision-making tables, stating, “There are individuals engaged, and they are doing the work, and they will do the work because they feel like they belong. They feel like they matter.”

CELEBRATING ADVOCACY WINS

Because of its dedication to developing residents as leaders, DREAM 77021 has expanded the ideas of upstream prevention and shared leadership throughout the neighborhood.

In 2022, DREAM 77021 helped mobilize a group of residents to bring awareness to a petition that recommended installing speed cushions on problem streets to increase safety. The work had been stalled, but DREAM 77021 partnered with OHIP (OST/South Union Health Improvement Partnership) to re-engage residents and meet with local representatives at District D. This resulted in an approved ordinance that moved the installation project forward. With OHIP’s partnership, residents leveraged collective advocacy for increased community safety.

DREAM 77021 maintained a presence as thought partners and leaders in OST/South Union, including in strategic planning efforts and local city council conversations. In 2023, OST/South Union community refreshed their Quality of Life Agreement— a document that would serve as a vision for OST/South Union. Under the leadership of LISC Houston and Go Neighborhoods, residents and local organizations, including DREAM 77021, identified priorities to include in the agreement. DREAM made a case for strategies to address upstream and root causes of issues, some of which had been captured by the collaborative’s ongoing community assessment. The final agreement reflected this upstream approach to supporting neighborhood health and wellbeing through prioritizing housing and development, education and youth services, and leadership and civic engagement.





BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR THE FUTURE

Improving a community's wellbeing is a long, challenging, and complex task that no one person or organization can do alone. DREAM 77021 puts a commitment to community wellbeing into practice in a concrete, values-driven way. Their dedicated staff brings in a range of community and residents to continually learn together, respond to community priorities, adapt, and build towards a long-lasting positive impact. In accordance with this vision, the equity warriors model will now be expanded and shared across neighborhoods to give more residents across Houston a chance to share their voices.

By continually focusing on building resident capacity, DREAM's work sets up individuals in the OST/South Union neighborhood to champion health, equity, and justice wherever their paths take them. The collaborative's mission and vision are sustained not just through DREAM's presence in the community but also through the enhanced skills and ambitious aspirations of the resident leaders DREAM 77021 works with.



This piece is dedicated to Gwendolyn Fedrick, whose commitment and service as a Community Coordinator were instrumental to DREAM 77021, and whose leadership as a community advocate in OST/South Union continues to inspire us.



DREAM77021
OST/SOUTH UNION



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health



PREVENTION
INSTITUTE