

A photograph of four volunteers, three men and one woman, wearing white t-shirts with 'VOLUNTEER' printed on them. They are standing around a wooden table outdoors, packing supplies. On the table are several cardboard boxes, some labeled 'FOOD' and 'AID', and some with 'FRAGILE' tape. There are also stacks of white cups and plastic containers. In the background, the open rear of a white van is visible, and a person is partially visible in a wheelchair on the right. The scene is set against a light-colored brick wall.

# Safety Net Initiative Overview



# Our story (so far)

In 2017, HealthSpark launched the Safety Net Initiative, a 10-year effort to build a more just and financially resilient social safety net in Montgomery County, PA.



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HealthSpark convened design teams composed of dozens of representatives from nonprofits and government agencies throughout 2018 to develop strategies around four areas that were identified as priorities by community partners: advocacy and communications, data, public-private partnerships, and reducing barriers to accessing services.



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The Safety Net Initiative was retooled in 2020 through a process of convening community partners for building back better the safety net system in the wake of Covid. This produced a revised set of strategies for strengthening the safety net by adopting an explicit justice and effectiveness frame, among other changes.



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Six key strategies emerged: Grantmaking fund, commissioned research, advocacy coalition, community of practice events, communications campaign, and leadership development for systems change.



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Dr. Frank E. Boston Black Justice Fund was developed and launched in 2021 to increase resources specifically allocated to historically under-funded Black-led and Black-serving safety net organizations.

# Initiative Highlights

- 01 **Systems Leadership Capacity Building Program** in partnership with the Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute (NELI) at Bryn Mawr College consisting of six full-day sessions and one evening session for Board members during 2021.

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- 02 Eight in-person **Community of Practice** events between 2018 – 2021, and over a dozen virtual events between 2020 – 2022.

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- 03 Funding for the **Complete Count Committee** to support a full and complete Census count in Montgomery County in 2020 and for **voter registration** in 2022 to facilitate increased community representation and engagement.

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- 04 Convening and funding support for **Montgomery County's Covid Relief Fund**.

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- 05 Annual **State of the Safety Net** Surveys between 2020 – 2022 to gather baseline data and to gauge the impact of Covid.

*“HealthSpark plays so many roles beyond being a grantmaker – they are a thought partner, a connector and convener, and a source of energy and ideas for making Montgomery County’s safety net stronger.” – Nonprofit leader*

# Initiative Highlights continued

- 06 **Safety Net Fund** grantmaking to support partners in testing ideas for how safety net organizations and services and systems could be improved, positioning several partners to leverage sizable ARPA grants in 2022.
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- 07 **Voices for Change**, a grantmaking initiative that provides funding support for arts, storytelling, and journalism that lift up unheard and underrepresented voices, including funding support for journalism focused on equity in pandemic-era policy and strengthening media/journalism for Spanish-language residents.
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- 08 Support for the **Racial Equity Learning Community**, a partnership of Bucks-Mont Collaborative, TriCounty Community Network, and the Interagency Council of Norristown that has trained hundreds of individuals.
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- 09 Co-lead on the **Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Strengths and Needs Assessment** in 2023, which will leverage community partnerships to identify strengths and needs of AAPI communities in the county.



# Safety Net Fund

The fund component of the Safety Net Initiative offers grants to community organizations that support the belief that a strong safety net benefits everyone, and Montgomery County's safety net will thrive through a shared commitment to nourish and sustain it.

Below are examples of grants provided that lead to incredible impact:



**Montco Mamas-** This program was created after the Montgomery County Early Childhood Consortium (MECC) looked at a Perinatal Period of Risk (PPOR) study to identify disparities in infant mortality, identified significant risk factors, and developed a community action plan to improve birth outcomes within the Black community. HealthSpark was an early investor in this program and provided deep strategic support. The foundation is thrilled to see that it has blossomed into an influential program.



**Montgomery County Street Medicine-** This program works to provide primary and urgent medical, eye, and dental care to individuals experiencing homelessness. It began as a partnership between Access Services and Tower Health in Pottstown and is now expanding county-wide. HealthSpark was an early investor and is grateful for this initiative's growth and contribution to the MontCo Safety Net, promoting inclusivity, equity, and coordinating crucial services for a vulnerable population.

**Since 2017, \$3,655,320 in grant funds have been distributed to organizations through the Safety Net Fund.\***

For a full list of partner grants, please visit:  
<https://healthspark.org/community-investments/grants>

\*Originally called the Innovation Lab

# Black Justice Fund

The Dr. Frank E. Boston Black Justice Fund (BJF) addresses the historical exclusion of Black leaders and Black community-serving organizations from tackling the challenges and opportunities facing Montgomery County residents. The BJF uses a Community Action Team (CAT) model, recruiting dedicated community members as an advisory group. These members show commitment to areas like housing, health equity, education, social justice, as well as lived experiences that are reflective of Montgomery County's Black populations. The CAT ensures funds reach Black leaders affected by racial disparities, prioritizing those committed to justice and equity in the county.

Here are two Black Justice Fund awardee highlights:



**Collegiate Bridge** - This organization is on a mission to revolutionize the collegiate experience of Black students and their families by providing a guided pathway from the college admissions phase through college graduation while creating a Black leadership pipeline positioned to impact change. We are grateful to this program for the empowering work they are doing in MontCo.



**Making a Difference Economically (MADE)** - MADE works to improve the lives of men in poverty through economic and social empowerment by implementing transformative programming in skills training, financial education, and life skills development. We are proud of this program and the uplifting mentorship environment they have naturally created for program participants.

**What's next?** As a previous CAT member highlighted, the significance of the networking, capacity building, and information-sharing that took place, proved to be more crucial than the actual funding applied for. This realization expands the scope for the future of the BJF. In 2024, the fund will initiate a third grant round. HealthSpark Foundation will continue to oversee the fund, with the support of the next Community Action Team, focusing on fostering capacity building and ecosystem development.

For more information on the Black Justice Fund, including our awarded grants, please visit: <https://healthspark.org/blackjusticfund>