

Cultivating a better tomorrow



A Case Statement for the Community Life Collaborative

our Mission

Engage communities around environmental justice by bridging untapped relationships, collaborations, and understandings across boundaries.

our Vision

Spark meaningful conversations and amplify voices, igniting transformational action as the regional center for environmental justice.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is increasingly wreaking havoc on all life while the most vulnerable people disproportionately bear the burden of environmental harms. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and new species at risk of extinction, including our own, call for coordinated efforts.

We know that when we attend to society's most vulnerable communities, we uncover solutions that serve all communities. That's why cultivating the next generation of climate justice leaders must be a priority. The urgency of this moment demands shared solutions and organized collective action.

The Community Life Collaborative (CLC) is a 501c3 nonprofit meeting communities at the intersection of the environment and justice by fostering relationships and collaborations across northeast Ohio. We are a resourcing, solution-seeking, let's-make-it-happen organization dedicated to advancing environmental justice.

In a steady rhythm of collective response, we strive to ENGAGE, PARTNER and TRANSFORM, scaling climate action and leadership for a better future.

Nonprofits focused on social change already in motion across northeast Ohio seek ways to combine assets of resources, influence, platforms, and connections to accomplish greater reach and impact, but the bandwidth to integrate such an effort remains limited. Impact organizations could use a central hub connecting people to one another, people to resources, and people to nature. Breaking down silos and fostering opportunities for collaboration feeds a transformative power. Rather than perpetuating the model of competing for scarce resources, what if someone could orchestrate intersectionality among the goals of nonprofits, elected officials, and the communities they serve?

OUR WHY

Social impact organizations repeatedly express a need for resources, visibility, and networking among like-minded organizations. As a **catalyst** and **connector**, the CLC was formed to weave connections and extend entry points of action among individuals and organizations in NEO eager to impact social and environmental change. We do this by building collaborations that advocate, promote, and implement community-led solution-finding.

We believe that to advance climate change solutions, from tree plantings to the Inflation Reduction Act to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, we must partner across inherent boundaries. We serve as a connector, convener, and catalyst for shared solutions among change agents for climate justice.

OUR PROCESS

As a community hub for connection to one another and to resources, we believe solutions for the most urgent environmental problems facing Northeast Ohio can be realized together. Change for a better future begins with cultivating relationships today. So, centering relationships, we break down silos and elevate intersectional collaboration across northeast Ohio through a cyclical process of:

ENGAGE→PARTNER→TRANSFORM

We **engage** community dialogue and immersion around social and environmental issues. Engagement reveals opportunities to **partner** across multidisciplinary sectors in shared response to issues and dreams. Then, as partnerships weave together circles of influence, our biased systems, practices, and ways of relating to one another are **transformed**.

Engage

Solving complicated issues involves both cultivating relationships and inspiring innovative thinking. The CLC engages communities through three channels as catalysts for innovation: *expressive arts, youth leadership and nature immersion*. In this way, we attract folks from richly diverse life experiences, all with a potential to actuate change.

EXPRESSIVE ARTS

From provocative art exhibits to gut-wrenching storytelling, encounters with the expressive arts foster visionary perspectives and untapped relationships that build allyship and advocacy.

Our Gardenview Gallery hosts such thought-provoking exhibits as handcrafted quilts depicting the last words of George Floyd, stunning photos capturing the unique contribution of regional pollinators, and contrasting photos depicting the Cuyahoga River then and now. Guests hear first-hand stories telling of harrowing immigrant journeys and of surviving decades incarcerated after wrongful conviction.

Through expressive arts, we foster a culture of creativity.



YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Moving the needle on climate justice tomorrow calls for harnessing the energy and perspectives of youth leaders today.

Youth organizations partner with the CLC to develop leadership skills. Mission-based youth groups champion projects caring for habitats. The YMCA summer camp integrates a youth-led community garden project where kids from nearby cities challenge each other on every aspect of implementation to transform a neglected space into a lush vegetable garden. And a multigenerational “Climate Fresk” pushes participants to collectively reason through a sequence pictorial set of causes and consequences to climate change.

Cultivating youth leadership and fostering opportunities for mutual mentorship work to propel the next generation of climate justice leaders to address the predicted unprecedented community needs with flexibility and innovation.



IMMERSION IN NATURE

Future environmental solutions will stem from a profound connection and appreciation for this fragile and interdependent web of life. What we cherish, we protect. Moreover, research consistently shows that Gen Z has a strong preference for immersive experiences.

The CLC invites opportunities for exploration, co-creation, interactivity and sensory exposure to deepen the bonds connecting people to people, people to resources, and people to nature. Immersive hands-on experiences astonish urban elementary kids with new understandings and perceptions. Planting trees in honor of loved ones who died from gun violence or opioid overdose and making room for expressing the lived stories can be restorative for a widening community of compassion. At the intersection of environmental health and emotional trauma, environmental justice makes space for healing people and the planet.



Engaging communities in fresh contexts and immersive exposures, opens wide new worlds and ways to convene, to connect and to be a catalyst for change.

Partner

We believe in a reality where $2+2=8!$ As an ongoing practice, the CLC cultivates partnerships for collaboration: listening with curiosity to discover the needs, assets, and shared opportunities that can propel exponential effects. We challenge ourselves to identify untapped synergies, intentionally seeking intersections among dreams, basic needs, and community assets.

One example of such connective efforts and shared resourcing recently resulted in the formation of Akron's Summit of Sustainability Alliance (SoSA). A conversation about advancing the United Nations Sustainability Goals led to the discovery of several local silos of good intentions. Those "silos" convened and formed a coalition dedicated to specific action goals to make climate sustainability into a shared reality. They, now, coordinate efforts and continue to set new goals and plan actions.

Within CLC partnerships, collaborators work alongside historically neglected communities to enhance the skills, resources and influence they request to take ownership and achieve their goals.



Transform

Change doesn't happen in isolation. The symbiosis of partnering with communities, organizations, foundations, policy-makers, and educators transforms the "impossible" into "possible!" when we meet at the decision-making table. Community engagement and partnership encounters create bonds for sustained education and solution-seeking.

Unanticipated capabilities emerge, surprising allies unite, and communities reclaim resilience.

Sprout 'n Share is a program that grew out of a common desire to unite in a movement around environmentally-friendly gardening to advance policy change and practice for climate equity across Northeast Ohio. A monthly think tank convenes to elevate the power of collective impact, they start where the passion is to move sustainability goals forward.

Celebrating, listening, and working side by side in community drives systemic change ... from the inside out. Building new relationships and getting close to the issues and the people most affected drives policy change.



Transformation toward a more just and equitable world will be led by youth leaders, nature lovers and justice seekers calling forth the most creative parts of all of us to work together to change systems. Transformation is the ultimate goal.

SHARED ASSETS = EXPANSIVE SOLUTIONS

The Community Life Collaborative offers a unique set of assets, adding critical value to social nonprofits when combined with the gifts and shared goals of community organizers across northeast Ohio. These assets catalyze change through our multi-platform framework:

- Donors invested in cultivating a better future
- A grant-writing team for applying to and funding collaborative projects
- The CLC staff and teams of social justice advocates
- Board of Directors comprised of forward thinking local leaders
- Partnering social change organizations across NEO, working to move the needle
- Digital voice piece and platform including website, social media, software and a growing network of contacts among like-minded change agents
- Teams of volunteers eager to advocate and take action
- A physical space for convening, connecting, and creating offered as dedicated space to cultivate a positive, inclusive, future
- A 20,000 sq ft building with commercial kitchen, gym and great room, gallery, classrooms, hearth room, offices and more
- 40 acres of fields, trails, a labyrinth, and woodlands

Our mission is our primary asset: Initiating relationships and action, Removing obstacles that hinder progress, and Amplifying impact. We come together to do this work, willing to pursue and undertake complex issues.



Cultivating a better tomorrow

We have big plans to champion a replicable model for Youth Summits, expand year-round exhibits and programming to elevate action to address pressing issues, demonstrate & spark sustainable practices across communities that help mitigate toxic effects of climate change.

Together, we can ensure that communities on the frontlines of environmental injustice have the resources, connections, and support they need to drive meaningful progress. Your partnership in this vision is vital—let's cultivate a space where ideas can grow into meaningful solutions for a more just and sustainable future.





A Message from the Executive Director: A Charge for Our Future

Dear Community,

The climate crisis is at a breaking point, and the time for change is now. We are facing an urgent need to transform awareness into action. As we witness the escalating environmental challenges, it is more important than ever that we equip individuals and groups with the tools they need to make a tangible impact and advance collaborations for collective action.

At the CLC, we believe that by mobilizing communities and fostering collaboration, we can create powerful, lasting change. Together, we can amplify regional efforts and make a greater impact in the fight for sustainability and a healthier planet.

As we continue to navigate the landscape of growth and impact, it is with great excitement and renewed purpose that I address you today. Our nonprofit has always been driven by a deep commitment to fostering connection, sustainability, and community engagement. Using the relationships we build around the arts, engaging and equipping young leaders, and immersing in nature together as we co-construct a foundation of trust to advance conversations about climate change.

In this next chapter of our journey, I want to highlight the incredible strengths we have and share the direction in which we are heading.

The **Family Life Center**, with a 20,000 square foot facility surrounded by 40 acres, invigorates the CLC's capacity to convene like-minded individuals and organizations. We see it as not just a space, but a thriving hub for collaboration that we're transforming into an energy efficient and waste reducing facility. Our location, bordering both Geauga and Cuyahoga Counties, offers an incredible opportunity for nature immersion and engagement with sustainable practices. The land we steward is more than just a space—it's a living example of what we stand for: sustainability, conservation, and the power of nature.

Our **digital platforms**—our website, social media channels (Facebook and Instagram), and email list—serve as powerful tools to connect with you, our dedicated supporters and partners. Through these platforms, we are able to communicate our vision, mobilize volunteers, and deepen awareness about social and environmental justice.

Most importantly, our access to a **committed stakeholder and volunteer base** strengthens our ability to implement our vision on a grander scale. With this support, we can expand our programs, create new opportunities, and ensure that our work is sustainable and impactful.

The CLC is a **dedicated safe space**—a platform for honest conversations, creative expression, and mutual respect. This is a space where we tackle the difficult issues and celebrate the solutions, where all voices are heard and valued. It's through these candid exchanges and strong connections that we can forge the collaborations that will drive real change in our communities.

Looking ahead, we are at a crossroads where the intersection of nature, technology, and community collaboration presents unprecedented opportunities. Together, with your continued support and active participation, we will continue cultivating a better tomorrow.

I am grateful for the strength of this community and the opportunity to lead us forward in this shared mission.

With gratitude and anticipation for what's to come,

Destinee Burse

Destinee Burse
Executive Director
Community Life Collaborative



Staff

Destinee Burse
Executive Director
executivedirector@communitylifecollaborative.org

Allen Garland
Facilities Manager
facilities@communitylifecollaborative.org

Board of Directors

Ann Lentz
President

Anne Burr
Treasurer, Vice-President

Maren Koepf
Secretary

Dan Allen

Pete Bednar

Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay

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