Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny

The Opportunity Communities Program

Building Opportunity-Rich Neighborhoods and Developing Pathways to Opportunity
What is Opportunity Communities?

The Kirwan Institute supports racially equitable policy and capacity building through its Opportunity Communities model. This model considers the multiplicity of factors such as housing, education, jobs, transportation, health, and engagement that stand at the center of one’s life and community. All of the work of the Kirwan Institute begins with the premise that everyone should have fair access to the critical opportunity structures and the social infrastructure needed to succeed in life, and the belief that affirmatively connecting people to opportunity creates positive, transformative change in communities. The Communities of Opportunity model advocates for a fair investment in all people and neighborhoods to improve the life outcomes of all citizens and to improve the health of entire regions.

Why Opportunity Matters

Fair access to opportunity is critical to promoting well-being and advancement in any society. Accessing opportunity to better our lives and our children’s lives motivates us to move across town, across the country, or across the world for better jobs, a quality education, a healthy environment, or safety from violence. Fair access to opportunity is also essential to produce a truly democratic society. In the context of community development, neighborhoods are the primary environments in which we access key opportunity structures. Neighborhoods often determine access to critical opportunities needed to excel in our society, such as high-performing schools, sustainable employment, stable housing, safe neighborhoods and health care.

Fifty years of social science research has demonstrated that isolated and disadvantaged neighborhoods restrict employment options for young people, contribute to poor health, expose children to extremely high rates of crime and violence, and contain some of the poorest performing schools. Neighborhood racial and economic segregation is also segregation from opportunities critical to quality of life, financial stability, and social advancement. Isolation and disinvestment threaten not only individuals and their families, but entire communities.
The Opportunity Communities model is a framework to address social and racial justice which intersects with community development, fair housing, public health, education, criminal justice, employment, and various other policy domains. It is based on the premises that everyone should have fair access to the critical opportunity structures needed to succeed in life and that affirmatively connecting people to opportunity creates positive, transformative change in communities. The Opportunity communities model advocates a fair investment in all of a region's people and communities – to improve the life outcomes of all citizens and to support a prosperous and healthy society.

Through collaboration with local partners, the Institute has utilized our Opportunity Communities model to produce policy change and new investments to assist marginalized communities and promote community development. Some of these recent policy impacts include:

- Establishment of a minority business accelerator in the greater Cleveland region.
- Development of the *Thompson v. HUD* fair housing remedial proposal.
- Adoption of land bank programs in the Detroit region.
- Utilization of opportunity maps to target affordable housing investments in the City of Austin, Texas.
- Establishment of a $5 million gap financing program to produce construction of affordable rental housing in high opportunity areas in Massachusetts.
- Targeting of $20 million in Neighborhood Stabilization Program investments into high-need, low-opportunity communities in Massachusetts.
- Adoption of a Community of Opportunity policy framework as guiding principles for the Connecticut Department of Housing and Community development.
- Adoption of a Community of Opportunity model for the Department of Community Development in Washington County, Oregon.
- Expansion and targeting of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund in Columbus, Ohio.
- Targeting of more than $10 million in revitalization program funding directed by the philanthropic community in Columbus, Ohio to marginalized neighborhoods.
- Adoption of opportunity-based school desegregation plans in Montclair, NJ and Louisville, KY.
- Revision of Ohio’s Equal Education Opportunity Policy to reflect contemporary legal parameters, including recommendations for diversifying K-12 schools and reducing racial isolation, all unanimously approved by the State’s Board of Education.
- Utilization of Kirwan’s opportunity and asset mapping framework in HUD funded regional sustainable communities’ plans in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, the Puget Sound Region and Connecticut.
- Adoption of Kirwan’s opportunity mapping methodology by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to assist with fair housing goals.
Opportunity Mapping: Building Capacity and Guiding Strategic Interventions

The organization’s signature work has been its “Opportunity and Asset Mapping” initiatives. Under these initiatives, Kirwan has utilized mapping technology and our Opportunity Communities model to address racial/social equity challenges, promote community development for marginalized communities, and affirmatively connect marginalized communities to critical opportunity structures such as successful schools, safe neighborhoods and sustainable employment.

Kirwan’s Opportunity maps have been utilized in policy advocacy, litigation, applied research, community organizing, coalition building and to inform service delivery. As an applied research institute, Kirwan’s mapping initiatives have had a direct impact on policy decisions and real world advocacy issues. To be fully realized, this approach requires extensive engagement, involvement and participation of the various local community partners.

Recent partners who have collaborated with the Institute include: The Opportunity Agenda; PRRAC; Mississippi Gulf Coast Regional Planning Commission; Gulf Coast Community Design Studio; Southern Mississippi Planning and Development Coalition; Puget Sound Regional Planning Commission; California Endowment’s Building Health Communities Hub Staff in Merced, CA; Communities Creating Opportunity (CCO) Kansas City, KS; The MICAH Project (New Orleans); PICO National; CityMatch (The National Organization of Urban MCH Leaders); Columbus Community Development Consortium; Hispanic Substance Abuse Network; FL Children’s Commission; the Greater New Orleans Foundation; Interfaith Funders group; and many others. We also have acted as an advisor to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.

What our partners say about our framework

“From an institutional perspective, involvement with this project has required us as an organization to reach out to potential partners we have not interacted with before. We have developed relationships with organizations working on issues such as smart growth, health disparities and education which have helped to inform and direct our fair housing work.”

- Erin Boggs, Deputy Director, Connecticut Fair Housing Center

“We have program outcome data on every program we fund, but we have never had a way to show impact upon a population or neighborhood. Opportunity mapping is a powerful tool that demonstrates the value of our work in a graphic and easy to understand way….our city budget continues to shrink but as we go forward we’ll be working on ways to refocus some of our investments.”

- Linda Lanier, Executive Director/CEO, Jacksonville Children’s Commission

“Within legal services, the mapping data is the foundation for a new place-based advocacy that seeks to bring intensive and comprehensive legal resources and social services to change outcomes in several low-opportunity zip codes or neighborhoods.”

- Fran Fajana, Director of the Race Equity Project, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

“The story of how our maps were created resembles the children’s story Stone Soup, in which a hungry community started out with nothing but a pot of water with stones and ended up with a rich soup that fed everyone because each person contributed something. Creating these maps was a community building experience that promises to have benefits that go beyond the maps themselves.”

- Andree Tremoulet, Ph.D. Housing Services Specialist, Washington County, OR, Department of Community Development
Fair Housing and Fair Credit Policy Development

Continuing its growing focus on fair housing and fair credit, the Institute’s Future of Fair Housing and Fair Credit Initiative emphasized three main findings: regional contexts and local relationships matter; local efforts should be supported by a federal platform of consumer protections and a federal commitment to affirmatively promoting fair credit and fair housing for all citizens; and it is important to compellingly communicate what a fair and just 21st century economic system looks like and what kind of financial system can support it. Working around these principles, Kirwan is part of a national coalition which developed a list of civil rights principles for reforming the housing finance system, provided input to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of the Treasury, submitted a report to Congress, and discussed this topic in a week-long special edition of the Kirwan Institute’s Race-Talk blog.

Thompson v. HUD and Fair Housing in Baltimore

Working with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Maryland ACLU on behalf of more than 15,000 public housing residents represented in a class action lawsuit, the Institute has helped design a remedial fair housing strategy for the Baltimore region. The Institute’s opportunity mapping and opportunity-based housing model was utilized to design a 7,000-housing-unit fair housing program in response to a Fair Housing Act violation found against the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. At this time, advocates are awaiting the US District Court judge’s final ruling.

Housing, in particular its location, is the primary mechanism for accessing opportunity in our society. Where you live is more important than what you live in. Housing location determines the quality of local public services, such as schools, the degree of access to employment and transportation, and the degree of public safety. Often this underlying reality is made evident in housing values, so where you live also determines how much wealth you can build through homeownership.

Currently, most affordable housing is disconnected from opportunity. Some federal housing programs and exclusionary land use policies have worked to concentrate affordable housing in segregated, opportunity-poor communities. This is most evident in subsidized housing policies. Historically, subsidized housing was deliberately placed in racially segregated communities. Contemporary subsidized housing policies have continued this trend, locating the majority of new units in impoverished and segregated central city neighborhoods. The Kirwan Institute housing research focuses on providing fair access to opportunity communities through affordable housing development and fair housing policy.
Decades of great distress, population loss, segregation, and neglect have left many neighborhoods in great distress. Neighborhood revitalization is therefore critical to bringing opportunity back to our distressed communities. The Kirwan Institute has worked on a number of initiatives that identify opportunities and challenges to neighborhood revitalization, while promoting policies that support the resurgence of these communities. The institute's model of neighborhood revitalization aims to create neighborhoods of choice that are accessible to all residents.

Targeted Reinvestment to Bring Opportunity Back to Distressed Places

The Kirwan Institute has worked on a number of initiatives which identify opportunities and challenges to neighborhood and community revitalization, while promoting policies that support the resurgence of these communities. The Institute promotes a model of neighborhood revitalization with the goal of improving neighborhoods while assuring the communities remain neighborhoods of choice that are accessible to all residents.

The Kirwan Institute was recently commissioned by The Community Development Collaborative of Greater Columbus to assess the trends which have shaped community conditions and impacted community development in Franklin County’s diverse neighborhoods. This study is intended to provide data analysis and mapping to help inform Columbus’ and Franklin County’s community development capacity and strategy in the context of regional change. This study will inform a facilitated discussion at the Community Development Collaborative Neighborhood Summit on January 24, 2012, regarding how area nonprofit, for profit, government and philanthropic sectors can envision a strategic, proactive response to the demographic and economic changes underway in Franklin County.
Decades of disinvestment, population loss, segregation, and neglect have left many neighborhoods in distress. Neighborhood revitalization is therefore critical to bringing opportunity back to our communities. The Kirwan Institute has worked on a number of initiatives that identify opportunities and challenges to neighborhood revitalization, while promoting policies that support resilience of these communities. The institute’s model of neighborhood revitalization aims to create neighborhoods of choice that are accessible to all residents.

**Neighborhood Revitalization in Columbus, Ohio**

Working as a consultant to the Columbus Foundation, the Institute has aided the foundation in designing its neighborhood revitalization strategy for Columbus, Ohio. In addition, the strategies and recommendations produced by the Institute have informed the local United Way’s effort to redesign its neighborhood revitalization program. Ideally, these two initiatives will direct significant funds into neighborhood revitalization in Columbus’s marginalized communities.

**Vacant Property Reform in Detroit**

In a city inundated with tens of thousands of vacant properties, advocates in the Detroit region have long pushed for a land bank program to redevelop vacant land and revitalize neighborhoods. Working with MOSES, the Institute provided extensive assistance to aid the land bank advocacy efforts in the Detroit region. After several years of extensive effort by advocacy organizations, both Wayne County, MI and the City of Detroit have created new land bank programs. These new programs come at a critical juncture in Detroit’s history, with vacant property challenges escalating due to the foreclosure crisis.
Promoting Fair and Equitable Planning Policy to Support Sustainable Development

Sustainable regional development in the United States faces many challenges. Distressed communities, fragmented open space, damaged ecosystems, and climate change are powerful reminders of the unsustainable development patterns and policies which have produced harm to both our society and our planet. Sprawling development and the continual movement of opportunities, investment, and people away from our city and traditional town centers diminishes rural and natural landscapes, while accelerating long auto commutes which increase CO2 emissions. In our distressed communities, continual disinvestment and the flight of resources and lack of investment produces extreme isolation for marginalized communities, resulting in segregation into distressed unhealthy environments where they are separated from the critical life sustaining opportunity structures needed to survive and thrive in our 21st century society.

While farmland is being paved over for new housing and roadways, disadvantaged and marginalized communities can’t find access to healthy produce. A massive investment in new infrastructure is occurring for suburban growth, while existing infrastructure is neglected in our existing communities. New housing and commercial construction on the urban fringe contrasts sharply with existing neighborhoods pockmarked by vacant homes and abandoned businesses. Local development policy, jurisdictional fragmentation, and inter-regional competition interact with all of these processes, often working to promote unsustainable growth and unhealthy communities. The development model which has fueled our economy in past decades and shaped our communities, and nation, represents an unsustainable system which must be reshaped to produce sustainable development, livable communities, and an equitable, healthy society.

Sustainable and equitable regionalism calls for proactive policymaking that gives all people access to neighborhood resources, connections to opportunity-rich areas within their region, and a voice in the future of their own community. It also affirms the need for every community to have a voice in the resource development and future of its region. Equitable regionalism builds and sustains region-wide, collaborative institutions with inclusive representation. The common goal is to improve the health of the whole and expand opportunity for all people and communities across the region.

Equitable regionalism creates access to opportunity, leadership, and responsibility, with a particular focus on marginalized communities. Multiple strategies – including a focus on people, places, and the linkages among them – can connect these communities to opportunity. Investing in people, neighborhoods, and communities promises returns not just to a select few individuals or neighborhoods, but to the entire region.

Every region’s most important resource is its people – all of its people – and their energy, creativity, and hope for a better future. A cooperative commitment to equitable development acknowledges and works within the cultural, racial, and historical dynamics that characterize any region. This approach puts a region on a positive trajectory of growth, vitality, and sustainability for all of its communities.
Regional Equity & Sustainable Development, cont.

The Kirwan Institute: Supporting Equity in the HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative

In June 2010, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Transportation (DOT), released a Notice of Funding Availability for a Regional Planning for Sustainable Development grant. These HUD sustainability grants represent an unprecedented infusion of federal support for regional planning that integrates housing and transportation decisions, and increases state, regional, and local capacity to incorporate livability, sustainability, and social equity values into land use plans and zoning. One hallmark of these grants is the requirement that consortia increase participation and decision-making of populations traditionally marginalized in public planning processes in developing and implementing a long-range vision for the region.

The Kirwan Institute is deeply engaged in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI). The Institute has advised HUD on the program and is working with Sustainable Communities grantees in several regions.

Leadership in Equitable Development

The Institute, in collaboration with two other programs, was recently awarded a technical assistance grant to be one of the primary technical assistance providers for HUD on equitable development for the national sustainable communities program. This three-institution collaboration also includes PolicyLink and the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California.

Post-Katrina Mississippi Gulf Coast Redevelopment

Starting in February of 2011, the Institute joined forces in a multi-year collaborative planning effort to reinvigorate the Mississippi Gulf Coast area, following Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Working with The Ohio State University Department of City and Regional Planning and the Gulf Coast Regional Planning Commission, the Institute is creating opportunity maps and regional food access maps which will guide regional plans, and also led trainings on civic engagement with disadvantaged communities. The collaborative three-year, $2-million planning effort is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Increasing Opportunity in Seattle

The Institute is working with the Puget Sound Regional Council in Seattle, WA to assist in leading an opportunity mapping initiative as part of their HUD SCI plan. The Institute also has held webinars designed to help several grantee regions in their activities, and it has released a report on community engagement to grantees: Growing Together for a Sustainable Future: Strategies and Best Practices for Engaging with Disadvantaged Communities on Issues of Sustainable Development and Regional Planning.
The Kirwan Institute has developed a growing cluster of public health projects that utilize the Institute’s opportunity communities framework and opportunity mapping tools to explore the interconnection between structural barriers to opportunity and health equity. These projects have included:

- Mapping the potential impact of proposed hospital closures in New York City in conjunction with one of our partners, The Opportunity Agenda.
- Identifying best practices in engaging communities through participatory mapping activities to address poverty and health disparities in collaboration with the Health Policy Institute at the Joint Center for Economic and Political Studies.
- Working to support food security and develop models of identifying gaps in food security access in coastal Mississippi as part of the HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative.
- Working with the California Endowment to utilize our opportunity mapping approach to inform a series of community engagement activities in the Central Valley of California to support the Foundation’s Building Healthy Communities target communities.
- Engaging communities in Kansas City and New Orleans in identifying emergency room “hot spots” in collaboration with local PICO organizers as part of the Bringing Health Reform home campaign.
- Conducting training with CityMatch (representing urban public health agencies), the National Hispanic Substance Abuse Network and the Michigan Minority Health Commission to train public health professionals and advocates on utilizing opportunity mapping to address social determinants of health in marginalized communities.

Building Healthy Communities of Opportunity
The Kirwan Institute

works to create a just
and inclusive society where all people
and communities have
opportunity to succeed.