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Letter from the Board

Systems work requires long-term dedication, and as KConnect celebrates its ten-year anniversary, we can proudly say that its commitment to transforming broken systems has been unwavering. Over the course of these ten years, and especially the past twelve months, KConnect has been expanding its work to better address the systemic challenges we face in Kent County. As the co-chairs of the Board of Trustees, we can confidently speak for all of the Trustees in saying that we are grateful for the response of the KConnect network - your continued support by way of Workgroups, Align and Design Teams, APC participation, and most importantly, how you continue to step up for those who are most impacted by inequitable systems. The impact that we have made in the community was only possible because of the hard work and dedication of the workgroups, supporters, and backbone team.

Over the last decade, our network has served the most vulnerable communities as it analyzed data, listened to those with lived experience, developed strategies, and implemented system-level interventions to close gaps. The KConnect network comprises passionate changemakers who come together to create a lasting impact that creates an equitable community for all people. This success is a result of true community collaboration led by the KConnect team.

The Backbone team at KConnect has embraced the critical role of assessing Kent County’s most pressing needs and serving as the organizers that bring together the network to implement plans of action to address those needs. Led by president Salvador López, KConnect has built capacity on his team; they have worked tirelessly to develop relationships and align strategies among community partners that benefit historically underserved populations. Their commitment to equitable outcomes has continued to push the network forward.

We appreciate the relationships that have been developed and strengthened over the last decade and look forward to continuing to bring new partners to the network in order to continue making a lasting impact. Thank you for all of your time, energy, and dedication to this important work. Working together, we will continue to advance a collective movement to ensure all children in Kent County have an equitable path to economic prosperity through quality education, family, and community support. Here’s to another decade!

Sincerely,

Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell & Jamon Alexander
Co-Chair

Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell
2023 Board of Trustees
Jamon Alexander, Co-Chair
West Michigan Center for Arts + Technology
Andrew Brower
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Krista Flynn
PNC Bank
Vanessa Greene
Grand Rapids African American Health Institute
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West Michigan Works!
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Kevin Polston
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Diana Sieger
Grand Rapids Community Foundation
Stacy Stout
Steelcase Foundation
Randy Thelen
The Right Place
Michelle Van Dyke
Heart of West Michigan United Way

Jamon Alexander
A decade ago, KConnect embarked on a journey fueled by curiosity, creativity, and courage. This theme is highlighted throughout this Impact Report and woven within our work as we move into our next phase.

Our commitment to curiosity has guided us through uncharted territories, especially during the early years. It propels us to collect and analyze data, ask questions, and seek innovative solutions. In the face of complex challenges, curiosity empowers us to explore, learn, and adapt - essential qualities that have been the cornerstone of our journey over the past ten years.

Creativity has allowed us to envision possibilities where others may see roadblocks. We celebrate the diversity of ideas and perspectives woven together to create impactful strategies to close disparity gaps. Whether launching system-level initiatives or finding inventive ways to engage our community, our collective creativity has catalyzed meaningful change.

Courage has been the heart of our organization since its inception, enabling us to confront systemic issues collectively. It has propelled our community to take risks, challenge the status quo, and advocate for justice. With courage as our guiding force, we have dared to change behaviors, push boundaries, and embrace the uncomfortable conversations that lead to real, lasting change.

All of this has been made possible thanks to the power of network partnerships. Alone, we may be a force, but together, we are a movement. Our journey has reaffirmed the importance of forging alliances, building bridges, and fostering relationships that extend beyond organizational boundaries. The interconnected web of partnerships we’ve cultivated has proven instrumental in our collective ability to effect systemic change.

As we reflect on the past decade, let us celebrate our achievements and renew our commitment to curiosity, creativity, and courage. These guiding principles will continue to inspire us as we forge ahead, addressing new challenges and embracing fresh opportunities.

Thank you for being an integral part of our story, for your unwavering support, and for joining us to pursue a better, more equitable future.

With gratitude,

Salvador López,
President, KConnect
KConnect Vision

KConnect’s vision is to advance a collective movement aimed at ensuring all children in Kent County have an equitable path to economic prosperity through quality education, family, and community supports. Fundamental to our vision is that we are committed to nothing less than closing the unacceptable achievement gaps for low-income students and children of color and increasing the achievement for all students from prenatal to college and career.

KConnect Mission

KConnect is a network of public and private organizations working to advance a collective movement aimed at ensuring all children in Kent County have an equitable path to economic prosperity through quality education, family, and community support.
Collective Impact 101

Collective Impact is a collaborative approach to addressing complex social issues by bringing together cross-sector stakeholders to work towards a common goal. It recognizes that individual organizations working in isolation cannot effectively address complex social issues. Collective Impact creates a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to social change by fostering collaboration and coordination. The following five conditions define Collective Impact:

**Common Agenda**
All network members must have a shared understanding of the problem and a common vision for change. This involves establishing specific, measurable goals that everyone can work toward, such as the KConnect co-created Workplan.

**Shared Measurement Systems**
Developing a set of common indicators and metrics helps align the efforts of different organizations, ensuring that everyone is working towards the same outcomes and can track progress collectively. This is operationalized by KConnect through our publicly available Data Dashboard.

**Mutually Reinforcing Activities**
Rather than duplicating efforts, organizations collaborate by coordinating their activities to complement and support each other.

**Continuous Communication**
Open and frequent communication is essential to building trust among stakeholders. Regular communication ensures that everyone stays informed, engaged, and aligned with the common agenda.

**Backbone Support**
Collective Impact initiatives often have a dedicated support structure, known as the Backbone, that facilitates and coordinates the collaborative effort. This team helps manage the overall process, fosters communication and supports the network.

In addition to these five conditions, Collective Impact focuses on equity. Equity is central to Collective Impact because it recognizes that effective collaboration and sustainable change require a commitment to fairness, inclusion, and addressing the underlying causes of social issues. By prioritizing equity, organizations such as KConnect aim to create lasting positive outcomes for communities in a just and inclusive way.
KConnect Structure

KConnect’s Structure has evolved significantly over the past ten years. What started as two workgroups has grown into a broad network of cross-sector partners across Kent County. As we move into our next phase, we will move from theory to action.

KConnect has always been committed to addressing the critical issues facing Kent County, especially for children and families of color. We have spent a decade collecting and visualizing data, developing our workplan, and designing a framework around our three Core Workgroups, which are focused on the prenatal to career continuum. These Core Workgroups laid the foundation and guided our path to where we are today.

In our commitment to drive impactful change, we have recognized the need for a more targeted and actionable approach. Therefore, we are announcing a shift to our framework and will refocus our efforts from Core Workgroups to Align and Design Teams. These are strategy-focused teams aimed at addressing specific racial disparities highlighted on our data dashboard.

This transition is a deliberate step towards fulfilling our vision to ensure that everyone in Kent County has an equitable path to economic prosperity. The Core Workgroups were essential in shaping our understanding of community gaps - the Align and Design teams will take it one step further to align with community work and design and implement strategies.

Align and Design Teams consist of dedicated cross-sector experts and those with lived experience, each equipped with the knowledge and passion to tackle the distinct challenges faced by our community. With this transition, we aim to create tailored strategies that are agile, responsive, and effective in producing measurable outcomes.

KConnect is

A voluntary partnership
A community-wide collective
A private-public collaborative
A process facilitator
A collector-integrator-assessor of data
A coordinator of work groups
An innovation scout
A transparency advocate
An experiment in “collective impact”
Committed to equity
Research and data-driven
A system change effort
Open

KConnect is not

Mandatory
A direct service provider
A program designer
A funder
A competitor
A funding filter
A protector of status quo
An exclusive club
A power structure
Committed to past structures
Idea and opinion-driven
A band-aid approach
Closed
Our Align and Design Teams

Led by KConnect's Director of System Change, Maegan Frierson, we currently have four active Align and Design Teams: Business Ownership, Certificate Completion, College Enrollment, and Diverse Educators.

Business Ownership
The Business Ownership team, funders, and community partners will conduct a site visit to the Cincinnati Minority Business Accelerator housed at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber to collectively build strategies to attract, retain, and scale entrepreneurs of color and their businesses in Kent County. The purpose is to connect with thriving communities outside of Kent County regarding best practices and models that support entrepreneurs of color.

YEAR ONE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES:

Strategy One: Engage cross-sector partners to design infrastructure and incentives that support resource sharing and synergies for entrepreneurs of color in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Strategy Two: Support black and brown businesses with the potential to scale through the support of developing and accessing the right capital stack, joint ventures, and acquisitions.

Strategy Three: Support black and brown businesses with the needed access to buyers/contracts and back office supports to scale.

YEAR TWO IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY:
Develop a plan to attract larger and scalable minority-owned businesses to Grand Rapids.

Certificate Completion
The Certificate Completion team launched and will have data on the dashboard in 2024. This team will align with KConnect’s Policy Priorities and the state of Michigan’s Sixty by 30 initiative.
College Enrollment
The College Enrollment team will align with KConnect’s Policy Priorities and the state of Michigan’s Sixty by 30 initiative.

Culturally Responsive Instruction
Building off the work of Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell’s Educators of the Yam initiative, KConnect launched the Shades of Strength Collaborative (SOS Collaborative) alongside local educators of color in Kent County.

The SOS Collaborative is a dedicated network fostering a supportive and enriching community for PK-12 educators of color in Kent County. A needs assessment for educators revealed their top priorities: mentorship, community events, space to be heard and to share experiences, and the ability to collaborate and commune with colleagues. The overarching vision is to establish a platform that champions equity, celebrates diversity, and actively supports the retention of people of color in the Kent County PK-12 system, ultimately leading to equitable educational experiences and enhanced outcomes for all students.

Shades of Strength is partnering with the Educators of Color Network (GVSU) in a Professional Learning Community around the work of author Dr. Rita Kohli’s book, Teachers of Color: Resisting Racism and Reclaiming Education. This Professional Learning Community will include Kent County in-service education professionals of color and pre-service education students of color. KConnect provided a book pickup experience involving conversation and appetizers, two virtual discussion sessions, and a reflection reception. In the Spring of 2024, Dr. Rita Kohli will deliver an in-person learning experience, followed by a celebratory reception for all participating Kent County educators of color.
During the first five years of work - from 2013 to 2018 - the KConnect Network co-created the Workplan. Eight Success Measures span the prenatal to career continuum. Within these Success Measures are 27 Indicators. We believe that by measuring and developing strategies under these categories, we will be able to improve outcomes in a significant way.
A Success Measure refers to a specific metric along KConnect’s Prenatal to Career Continuum that is used to measure the status of a particular goal. It serves as a quick and easy way to assess programs and determine whether the desired outcome has been achieved. These measures enable stakeholders and communities to make informed decisions and develop appropriate next steps to close disparity gaps.

An Indicator is a specific measure used to assess the performance of a key data point under KConnect’s Success Measures. Indicators were identified and vetted by KConnect’s Data and Capacity Workgroup in partnership with the Core Workgroups as the KConnect Workplan was developed.
The Three C’s

At KConnect, we use the following three words to describe our work.

Curious
KConnect embodies curiosity by:

Exploring, analyzing, and visualizing data that few organizations can or are willing to explore

Using this data to encourage others to ask questions that have previously been unasked

Gathering knowledge and opinions from cross-sector partners with various perspectives

Fostering conversation between community members, partners, organizations, government, and philanthropy that may not typically find themselves seated at the same table

Creative
KConnect embodies creativity by:

Developing innovative solutions to close disparity gaps along the prenatal to career continuum

Fostering a culture of innovation that benefits from creative thinking, experimentation, and risk-taking

Experimenting and creating innovative strategies, frameworks, and tools that are new to the community or focus area

Working to make invisible systems visible, fostering a sense of belonging, and crafting solutions for our shared future.

Courageous
KConnect embodies courage by:

Challenging the status quo to change systems and structures that perpetuate disparities by disrupting norms, sharing stories, and highlighting applicable data

Being open and willing to address the root causes of these systemic inequities, which tackles the deep-rooted issues that can upset some system leaders and organizations

Addressing inequities by confronting those who uphold an unjust system

Embracing uncertainty and taking risks when developing solutions to complex problems

Acknowledging or owning that failure is a part of a courageous process.
Data and Scorecard

Data plays a pivotal role in the success of Collective Impact organizations by providing a solid foundation for informed decision-making. KConnect relies on data to understand the nuances of the challenges we seek to address. Comprehensive and accurate data enables us to identify the root causes of problems, assess the impact of interventions, and track progress over time. It is a common language that unifies stakeholders, fostering transparency and accountability.

Career Readiness
The employment rate among young adults in Kent County has demonstrated a positive uptick, showcasing the growing pool of talented individuals contributing to the workforce and vitality of the community.

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<thead>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>93.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
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Post-Secondary Readiness
The number of high school graduates ready for continuing education has shown a slight improvement, underscoring the strengths and potential of these students as they embark on their academic journeys beyond high school.

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<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
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High School Graduation
While the number of high school students graduating within four years has remained consistent, it’s important to recognize the persistence and dedication of these graduates, who have successfully completed their high school education within the traditional timeframe.

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<tr>
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<td>85.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>85.1%</td>
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Kindergarten Readiness
Although there isn’t a standardized Kindergarten Readiness Assessment in Kent County, our partners at First Steps Kent have been actively bringing together community advocates and experts to create a thorough assessment. They aim to utilize existing resources and expertise to address the current gap.

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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>43%</td>
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Third Grade Reading
The proficiency levels of third-grade students in reading have shown a slight increase over the past year. This progress highlights the valuable strides these students are making in their literacy skills, laying a strong foundation for their academic and personal growth.

Post-Secondary Success
While the total number of adults with an Associate’s degree or higher has seen a slight decline since 2021, it’s crucial to highlight the significant assets and capabilities that individuals possessing such qualifications bring to their respective fields and communities.

Basic Family Income
While the number of families living at or above 200% of poverty has remained constant, it’s essential to acknowledge the significant improvement since KConnect began collecting data in 2012. This improvement underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of these families, highlighting their ability to navigate challenges and work towards greater economic stability over time.

Thriving Family Income
Thriving Family Income looks at the racial/ethnic gap in income across Kent County. The gap has significantly decreased over the past year, caused primarily by the improving outcomes for Hispanic families.
Thriving Family Income

Thriving Family Income is a Success Measure that tracks the gap between household income based on race/ethnicity. Historically, white households have fared better than households of color, specifically the Black and Hispanic communities. Recent data highlights a promising trend indicating that Hispanic households are making substantial progress in narrowing the income gap with white households. Over the past five years, the income growth within the Hispanic community has outpaced that of white households, showcasing a positive trajectory toward economic stability and coming closer to closing the gap.

Ensuring that households have comparable annual incomes regardless of race and ethnicity is crucial for fostering an equitable society. Income equality across diverse communities contributes to the community’s overall well-being and stability. When households of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have similar incomes, it signifies a reduction in systemic barriers and a more level playing field in accessing opportunities such as quality education, healthcare, and housing.

While challenges persist, these data points suggest a noteworthy step towards fostering economic equality and dismantling longstanding disparities.
Prosperity Index

In 2021 KConnect launched the Prosperity Index, a weighted index of all of KConnect’s Success Measures and Indicators. It measures the movement of these data points and helps show the direction that the community is heading. The baseline was set to 1,000 points, with Success Measures having twice the weight of Indicators. Think of it as the Dow Jones Index for Kent County children and families.

Upon examining the data, our Data and Capacity Workgroup noted a decline in the community’s overall prosperity below baseline levels during COVID. However, from 2021 onward, prosperity has been on a steady rise, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Notably, the Prosperity Index currently stands nearly 30 points higher than during the pandemic, primarily propelled by economic growth and improved outcomes in post-secondary education.

The Prosperity Index changes regularly based on updated data from the KConnect Data Dashboard, and the Data and Capacity Workgroup reviews it after each shift. More information will be coming as the Prosperity Index continues to evolve.
A Look Back at KConnect’s Accomplishments

Collective Impact Expertise
KConnect has served as a Collective Impact content expert to other Collective Impacts and other convening organizations worldwide. Some of those communities include Traverse City, MI; Aspen, CO; Greensboro, NC; Cambridge, MA; London, UK; and Israel.

We have also worked closely with local organizations such as the Kent County Health Department and the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan to build their capacity around data, convening, and facilitation.

In 2023, KConnect partnered with Corewell Health Healthier Communities and the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan to develop an equitable and accessible funding process to distribute $200,000 to the Roosevelt Park neighborhood. The process was successful and will be scaled to other communities.

Increased the Community’s Capacity Around Data
Over the past ten years, KConnect has normalized the use of disaggregated data on its Data Dashboard and throughout the community. Modeled after our practices, many nonprofit organizations follow suit and work with disaggregated data to see the full picture of disparities in areas like education and career. Our Data and Capacity Workgroup is comprised of experts in the field who frequently assist other entities interested in enhancing their capacity in transparent data usage through the Community Data Trust.

With other data-focused partners, KConnect launched the Community Data Trust, a concept that allows for open and transparent data sharing and utilization.

In 2017, KConnect worked with local partners to identify a data system that was being sold but ended up being fraudulent. Had KConnect not stepped in, the data system would have cost the community and state nearly seven million dollars.

Early Childhood System Support
In 2016, KConnect worked closely with First Steps Kent to revitalize the organization by providing technical assistance refocused on systems, not programs, and by facilitating partners towards an eventually successful early childhood millage.

In 2022, KConnect partnered with the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, the Community Data and Research Lab, and other partners to launch the Spanish Dashboard, which provides prenatal to career to Spanish-speaking populations.
Community Engagement
KConnect’s Community Engagement Workgroup developed the community’s first Compensation Structure, which advocates for community voice by laying out a framework for compensation to those sharing their context expertise. This document is the starting point for the Community Engagement Guidebook that will be shared in 2024.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, KConnect immediately investigated how it might impact local communities and spent months developing actionable intelligence. Multiple stakeholders used this information to inform their approach to community work.

In 2023, KConnect hired its first Postdoctoral Fellow, Dr. Shayla Young, to focus both on Policy and Advocacy and Community Engagement. Dr. Young’s Community Engagement Guidebook, updated Compensation Structure, and newly-released Youth Compensation Structure have revolutionized the community’s response to authentic Community Engagement.

Redesigning the Housing System
KConnect was approached in 2018 to help the community address the vast racial disparities in the housing and homeless system. Over the span of five years, we collaborated with content experts, analyzed and shared related data, led various Workgroups, and held multiple convenings. We ultimately launched Housing Kent, which now serves as the Backbone organization for the redesigned housing system. We also produced a 30-minute documentary about the experience that has been viewed worldwide.

Developing the KConnect Structure
KConnect developed a structure based on Core Workgroups, Cross-Cutting Workgroups, and Align and Design—allowing strategy development across the prenatal to career continuum.
Transformative Goals

In an ever-evolving landscape, KConnect has brought together diverse stakeholders, fostering collaboration to achieve the common goal of assuring economic prosperity for all in Kent County. When we were launched in 2013, we had a strategic document referred to as the Common Agenda and Roadmap. This document served as a shared vision and path forward; however, after more than a decade, we decided to update it as we laid out our vision for the next five years.

A Common Agenda and Roadmap is a specific phrase used by Collective Impact organizations that refers to a written guide laying out frameworks for collaborative efforts to address complex social issues. It is crucial for aligning cross-sector partners towards a shared vision and common goals. It provides a coordinated approach to creating meaningful change in our community, guiding the collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders to a more equitable future.

Common Agenda 2.0 signifies a new, shared understanding among Network members about the disparities at hand, the desired outcomes, and strategies to achieve them. It will guide KConnect through the next five years as it leads to a significant and sustainable impact in Kent County.

Within Common Agenda 2.0, you will find six high-leverage activities. High-leverage activities are strategic actions that create significant positive outcomes and drive meaningful change in addressing complex social challenges. These activities focus on maximizing impact by leveraging the collective efforts and resources of KConnect’s cross-sector stakeholders. They were created with community input based on surveys and listening sessions led by Deanna Rolffs (L3 Consulting). We believe these six activities will change the landscape of Kent County and create a just community.
Policies are foundational to our society; they determine resource allocation, access, and, ultimately, where the power lies. Crafting policies prioritizing equity and justice is required for dismantling systemic barriers that uphold (perpetuate) disparities and division.

This has been at the core of our work since the beginning. The original KConnect steering committee members wrote, “The goal of the policy and advocacy workgroups is to educate and advocate for policies, resources, and practices that can strengthen the political will to pass, implement, and sustain effective long-term solutions that are aligned to the goals of the Initiative.”

Our first set of policy priorities will be made available to the Network in February 2024.

KConnect started its work ten years ago with Core Workgroups (Prenatal to Third Grade, 4th-12th Grade, and High School to Career) that laid the foundation of the KConnect Workplan and launched the Network’s first strategies. KConnect will now move the Core Workgroups into an advisory position while resources are turned toward Align and Design Teams in order to move the work from Design to Action.

KConnect has committed to having 20 Align and Design Teams launched in 2024 and 100 strategies to address disparities across the prenatal to career continuum by 2030.

Develop a shared policy agenda, and operationalize advocacy that dissolves inequities in our community

Elevating community voice is essential to creating inclusive, system-level strategies that address disparities for historically marginalized populations in Kent County. The key to successfully incorporating community voices is not just representation but purposefully creating a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and shared decision-making that crosses all organizational processes and operations.

Launch innovative system-level strategies that eliminate racialized disparities from prenatal to career.
Empower the Backbone to have decision-making authority.

KConnect will empower the Backbone Team to make tactical decisions and execute the day-to-day operations in alignment with the strategic framework affirmed by the APC. This division of responsibilities allows the Backbone to utilize their specialized skills and deep understanding of community needs to drive the organization’s strategies forward.

Ensure sustainability by diversifying funding

KConnect plans to engage with national funders, seeking their support to enable the growth and implementation of strategies from the Align and Design Teams. This approach allows for greater financial sustainability and opens the doors to wider audiences, enabling the organization to extend its reach to a larger scale.

KConnect aims to bring in $5 million dollars of national funding to support Align and Design Team strategies by 2030.

Increase and better leverage private sector partnerships

KConnect is working to increase private sector engagement by emphasizing the value and benefits of collaboration between the sectors. The KConnect Network will comprise 10% of private sector partners by 2030.

The Common Agenda and Roadmap 2.0 will be formally released in early 2024.
Collective Impact In Action
Regardless of size, every community has the potential for growth, progress, and transformation. This potential was realized for the Roosevelt Park neighborhood in Grand Rapids thanks to a collaboration between Corewell Health Healthier Communities, the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, and KConnect.

In the fall of 2020, Corewell Health Healthier Communities, Calvin University, and the Kent County Health Department received seed funding from Healthier Communities to develop a community-based participatory research approach to pilot in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood. The development of this model was pulled from the approach Calvin University has been using for over 20 years and the Health Equity Zone model in Rhode Island. The purpose of the model development was to create a resident-driven model that could be scaled to other neighborhoods and broaden the institutional support for the model, including addressing systematic change and implementing resident-identified solutions.

The Our Neighborhood, Our Health project dedicated time in 2021 to connecting with over 15 neighborhood organizations in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood to communicate the project’s vision. In March 2022, a Roosevelt Park Community Advisory Board was developed to provide input and guide the application of the approach in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood. The Community Advisory Board selected the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan as the lead community-based organization for this work.
The Hispanic Center approached KConnect, requesting the development of an equitable funding model to distribute funds. To accomplish this, KConnect visualized the data from the previous work and presented it to the community in English and Spanish. Based on the feedback received at the presentations, KConnect identified three priority focus areas and developed the framework for fund distribution. To ensure transparent and clear communication during the process, KConnect built a bilingual website that laid out the necessary steps to apply for funding. The organization formed a funding-decision team, including a content expert who was compensated using the KConnect Community Engagement Compensation Structure. Finally, KConnect developed and implemented an application evaluation tool based on the application questions.

KConnect recognized that creating meaningful change requires understanding the neighborhood’s unique needs, aspirations, and challenges. By amplifying residents’ voices, we laid the foundation for a funding framework that truly reflected the community’s desires. Drawing inspiration from the stories and insights the Roosevelt Park community shared, we crafted a process that removed barriers and expanded access.

In developing the funding process, KConnect recognized that transparency was vital to building trust within the community. We made it a priority to clearly outline the evaluation process, criteria, and decision-making structure. This openness gave applicants a clear understanding of what was expected and assured them that their projects would be evaluated fairly. By designing an equitable and inclusive grant funding framework, KConnect provides resources and nurtures a sense of ownership and agency within the community.

Ultimately, six organizations were selected for funding.

KConnect is exploring how to replicate this process in other communities both locally and across the country.

**Health**

**HISPANIC CENTER OF WESTERN MICHIGAN**

The Hispanic Center of Western Michigan will increase access to preventative health care services and informational outreach strategies.

**TRINITY HEALTH GRAND RAPIDS - CLINICA SANTA MARIA**

Clinica Santa Maria will purchase an artificial intelligence (AI) camera to test the eyes of patients with diabetes. They will also relaunch the “Centering Program,” which connects pregnant parents to necessary information and resources.

**Public Safety**

**GRANDVILLE AVENUE ARTS AND HUMANITIES**

Grandville Avenue Arts and Humanities will fund its Teen Leaders program focusing on academic support, leadership development, and civic engagement through internships, and creative expression.

**KSSN/SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CAMPUS PARENT GROUP**

Southwest Elementary School Academia Bilingue will fund its Guardia’s de Cruses program, ensuring the safety of students walking to and from school.

**Mental Health**

**ART OF MIND LLC**

Art of Mind will expand awareness of mental health as an important priority in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood by creating an AOM - Mental Health Champion certification.

**PUERTAS ABIERTAS**

Puertas Abiertas will expand 1:1 mental health therapy and therapeutic support groups for those in our community who have experienced domestic violence.
The educational landscape has long grappled with the lack of diversity within the educator workforce. Studies have shown that a more diverse group of educators positively impacts all students, fostering a sense of belonging and providing role models from various backgrounds. However, Kent County has a significant gap between students of color and educators of color.

To create an inclusive and diverse educational environment, KConnect launched a 360-degree strategy to inspire, train, recruit, and retain educators of color.

KConnect and the Align and Design Team recognized the importance of community voice. With the help of the Community Engagement Workgroup, we initiated a series of community engagement initiatives, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys, to create space for open dialogue. This allowed community members, including students and educators, to share their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations for a more diverse and inclusive educator workforce.

Lifting Educator Voice
KConnect approached community engagement as a learning opportunity, valuing the wealth of knowledge that community members, especially students, brought to the table. We actively listened to personal stories, concerns, and suggestions to gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities within the community. Through this work, KConnect identified key barriers that hindered diversity in the educator workforce, which included low teacher pay, a lack of support, limited access to education, and systemic biases in hiring and retention processes.

This work was supported by the creation of the Youth Compensation Structure, which was developed by KConnect Summer Intern Camille Gerville-Reache. This compensation structure is based on KConnect’s original structure but is tailored to the specific needs of community youth.

With the community’s insights, KConnect will launch a communications campaign in 2024 focused on inspiring and recruiting students of color to become educators of color.
The value of community members’ contributions should be recognized and reciprocated, regardless of age. As youth provide unique knowledge and services to the community, their efforts merit compensation, reducing participation barriers. However, few institutions adequately reimburse youth. The KConnect Youth Compensation Model was created to address this disparity and support organizations in developing equitable youth compensation practices. Research was pulled from existing youth participation models, youth statistics, and adult compensation models. Because equity is achieved when youth have a voice in decisions that affect them and their families, all features of this guide were researched, constructed, and reviewed by youth.

The Youth Compensation Model is an asset to KConnect’s Community Engagement Guidebook. Cross-sector community engagement experts are collectively developing a guidebook that engages both institutions and community members in the practice of equitable community engagement. This work is an adaptation of the previously designed Compensation Framework, which outlined a community engagement spectrum and monetary compensation associated with levels of engagement. At the core of this work, we honor lived experience as a content expertise for youth and adults. Youth are our community and have a vital role in developing it. Therefore, their voices, opinions, and experiences must permeate decision-making spaces, especially when decisions that are being made impact them and their families.
This model serves as an introductory resource for organizations as they aim to achieve equitable youth compensation. There are many nuances and factors to be considered when implementing this resource. With that in mind, we encourage organizations to engage with youth directly in determining the appropriate compensation for them. For example, youth were involved in the creation, review, and editing of this document; all youth participants were compensated. As you prepare to implement this model into your organizational fabric, here are a few things to highly consider before, during, and after engaging youth:

Camille Gerville-Reache, KConnect’s 2023 Intern and a 2023 high school graduate, developed this model.

### Compensation By Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Compensation (if adult members are also paid)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board / Governance</td>
<td>Monetary Compensation, Recommendations and references for work, school, and scholarships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth-led Organization or Campaign</td>
<td>Grants that cover a $15/hour payments wage for their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Monetary compensation of at least $15/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>Monetary compensation of at least $15/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Skills development, Food and beverages, Volunteer hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus/Discussion Group</td>
<td>Food and beverages during the meeting, Gift cards after a certain number of hours or meetings (worth $15 an hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Drawing of 3 $15 gift cards or 2 $25 gift cards, Visa/common store gift cards would be most accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Development</td>
<td>In addition to program benefits, Skills development, Small monetary incentives, Mentorship, Job/internship and scholarship help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Services</td>
<td>In addition to program benefits, Per diems, Small monetary incentives, Information on other resources, Food/beverages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A general recommendation of how youth should be compensated based on their position. Youth could hold more than one of these roles at a time; for example, a youth could be receiving food as a recipient but also be serving on the board of trustees. Dollar amounts are based on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated median hourly wage for US workers ages 16-24 in 2022.
Setting the “PACE” in Policy

PACE is an acronym for Policy and Advocacy and Community Engagement. It signifies the intentional connection we are fostering between Policy and Advocacy, and Community Engagement. We seek to achieve this within our cross-cutting workgroups and our overall approach to operationalizing advocacy.

**POLICY**
Our policy recommendations must contribute to the dissolution of the system as it currently stands, addressing spaces of inequity and amplifying what is just.

**ADVOCACY**
Our policy agenda supports the work of those in our network who contribute to managing, solving, and dissolving some of our community’s most complex problems and deepest inequities.

**COMMUNITY**
Community is defined by those in our network closest to the impact and those impacted by inequities in the system.

**ENGAGEMENT**
Our decisions are informed from the ground up, and we hold intentional space for listening and honoring voices/perspectives/lived experiences.
Why PACE?
KConnect is focusing its efforts on PACE for several reasons:

SYSTEMS CHANGE
PACE allows organizations, such as KConnect, to address the root causes of social issues by advocating for systematic change in collaboration with those most impacted by systemic injustices.

DISSOLUTION
While organizations that manage and solve problems are crucial, they often only address the symptoms of a problem. PACE creates systemic change as it dissolves inequities affecting entire communities and populations, leading to sustainable solutions with a broader reach and long-term impact.

AMPLIFYING VOICES
PACE empowers individuals and communities to have a voice in decision-making processes that affect them directly. This involvement fosters ownership, builds trust, and ensures that solutions are responsive to community needs.

COLLECTIVE ACTION
KConnect, as a Collective Impact organization, relies on collaboration among diverse populations to reach a common goal. PACE allows collaboration between government, nonprofits, businesses, and community members to leverage available resources and expertise for greater impact.

Why a Shared Policy Agenda?
Creating a shared policy agenda was important for several reasons:

GOAL ALIGNMENT
A shared policy agenda ensures that all participants in the KConnect network are aligned in their goals and priorities. It helps to clarify the collective vision for systemic change and ensures that everyone is working toward dissolving inequitable systems.

LEVERAGING COLLECTIVE POWER
The network can leverage its collective power and influence to advocate for change more effectively by creating a shared policy agenda.

BROADER PERSPECTIVE
Collaboratively developing, affirming, and operationalizing a shared policy agenda ensures that diverse perspectives and expertise are considered, leading to more comprehensive and effective policy solutions.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Involving those with lived experience in creating the shared policy agenda ensures that their voices and priorities are represented in advocacy efforts.
Developing the Policy Agenda

The inspiration behind developing the shared policy agenda stemmed from KConnect’s theme of being Curious, Creative, and Courageous.

In pursuit of curiosity, the leadership team took a deep dive into the network’s priorities through a two-part advocacy training hosted by the Michigan League for Public Policy. Nearly seventy items were recorded as potential policy priorities for the inaugural agenda, with education being an issue that resonated across sectors. The leadership team then received survey responses from the Core Workgroups, insights from the Align and Design Teams, and listening sessions with educators, leaders, and analysts to refine the focus further. The 12-month journey was marked by equity in decision-making, accountability to our diverse network, listening, and objectivity.

Creativity was sparked as the leadership team crafted tools and processes to elevate KConnect’s Policy and Advocacy work. One such tool, the Emergent Advocacy Tool, was created and implemented when the KConnect Backbone was asked to sign on to an Earned Income Tax Credit advocacy effort. From there, the team crafted an Emergent Advocacy Tool to help the Backbone and Workgroups make decisions around advocacy opportunities year-round. The Policy Formulation Tool helped the team remain objective as they selected policy priorities, which professionals and subject matter experts vetted during listening sessions.

Another aspect of creativity within the work is our intentional focus on involving those central to the work in decision-making, distinguishing KConnect from traditional approaches. PACE embodies the commitment to connecting Policy Work and Community, values we aspire to achieve at a deepened level. Moving forward, we seek to facilitate community-centered, equity-driven, innovative, and game-changing strategies.

One of the most courageous aspects of the work is that the team designs with dissolution in mind, which echoes KConnect’s ultimate goal of dissolving inequitable systems. There are politics to policy, especially in Kent County, where advancement and opportunity are often the results of access to resources, social capital, and privilege. KConnect seeks to navigate the political spaces with a courageous commitment to dismantling barriers and fostering a community where people thrive.
The Shared Policy Agenda
The PACE Convening was held in January 2024 to gather feedback from the Network and ultimately affirm the Shared Policy Agenda. The following is a list of the focus areas that were included.

Access to Affordable and Quality Childcare
SUCCESS MEASURE: KINDERGARTEN READINESS
KConnect is committed to advancing accessible and quality childcare solutions by advocating for affordability, quality, and children's and providers' well-being. We believe that all families in Kent County should have access to affordable and quality childcare, and childcare providers have the support and opportunities to thrive.

Access to Paid Family and Medical Leave
SUCCESS MEASURE: EMPLOYMENT
KConnect prioritizes family well-being by advocating for equitable policies and recognizing the importance of supporting individuals during life transitions. We believe all employees must have access to paid family and medical leave, and all employers, whether small or large businesses, can offer paid leave without adverse impact.

Equity in K-12 Educational Funding
FOCUS AREA: K-12 ACADEMIC SUCCESS
KConnect is dedicated to promoting educational equity by advocating for fair and adequate funding for vulnerable schools and districts, ensuring every student has access to a quality education regardless of socioeconomic status.

Access to Wraparound Supports in Postsecondary
SUCCESS MEASURES: COLLEGE COMPLETION, CERTIFICATE COMPLETION
KConnect strives to ensure every student’s success by championing increased college graduation rates through a collaborative community effort and statewide initiatives.

Next Steps
Now that the Network has affirmed the KConnect Shared Policy Agenda, the Michigan League for Public Policy will host a series of workshops to develop the next steps and strategic goals as the Network moves forward on operationalizing advocacy.

You can learn more about the Shared Policy Agenda and next steps by visiting www.k-connect.org/PACE
KConnect has finalized a plan of action to diversify our funding by way of a new source of revenue that would allow us to provide resources, share our models and frameworks, and offer coaching to people and organizations looking to advance equity and achieve systems change using a collective impact approach to collaboration.

Over the past two years, KConnect has worked closely with organizations and communities regionally, nationally, and internationally to bring Collective Impact to initiatives that address complex social issues. All of these communities have one thing in common - they expressed a desire to have a resource they could call on to help them address emergent issues. With that in mind, we are unveiling Connect US, a national consultancy that will not only diversify funding streams, but will ultimately bring talent, resources, and best practices to Kent County that may have otherwise been overlooked.

Connect US will allow KConnect to continue to build partnerships across the country and the world and will diversify our source of revenue with one purpose: to help continue to launch initiatives coming out of our Align and Design teams. Our goal is to have 10% of our unrestricted revenue generated by Connect US by 2027.
Our Resource Incubator tool highlights the various ways that Connect US can work within a community or organization to support their initiatives. These focus areas are based off learnings collected over the past decade. Connect US will partner with a community, offering a customized list of resources such as Community Engagement, Strategy, System Building, Equity, and more.

The decision to launch a consultancy was born out of a deep-seated belief that the principles of Collective Impact can be applied universally to a variety of problems. Connect US recognizes that each community is unique, with its own set of challenges and strengths. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, Connect US will work closely with local stakeholders to understand the specific dynamics of each community, co-creating frameworks and solutions that are based in local context. One of the key focuses will be to build the capacity of organizations and community leaders to lead their own change efforts, supported by the tools you see below.

The launch of Connect US is a significant step for KConnect as it ultimately strives to improve outcomes in Kent County by way of funding Align and Design Teams. By sharing our expertise and empowering communities nationwide, Connect US has the potential to create a domino effect of positive change, all inspired by the KConnect network.
The Dissolution Continuum, as pictured above, is a framework that KConnect co-created with CivicLab, a national consultancy focused on building capacity around systems building. It recognizes that there are three distinct types of ways to address complex societal injustices - you can manage them, solve them, or dissolve them. Connect US will work with system leaders to determine where they fit on the continuum and assist them as they work collectively to reimagine systems that work to close disparity gaps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POTENTIAL WORK</th>
<th>CONNECT-US</th>
<th>KCONNECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work is within KC Workplan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is not within KC Workplan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional (GR, Kent County)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National/International Client</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires travel outside of MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires meetings with partners outside of MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea/initiative/plan developed through A&amp;D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Models/frameworks designed by Kent partners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Models/frameworks designed by partners outside of KC</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This tool helps KConnect determine whether community work is best suited for KConnect or Connect US. One major factor is that KConnect will be focused on Kent County while Connect US will work outside of West Michigan. Another determining factor will be whether the initiative falls within the prenatal to career continuum or is outside of KConnect’s traditional scope of work.
Community Partnerships
Thrive + Prosper is a collective of local businesses, philanthropic organizations, investors, and community members who share a vision for all of Kent County. They aim to connect and facilitate ideas with networks and resources to drive generational impact while creating a community where everyone thrives and prospers. Led by Doug and Maria DeVos, Thrive + Prosper gathered an extensive body of research over the course of nearly two years and 2,000 community resident surveys. Based on that information, they determined that their efforts would be best spent focusing on the circumstances of opportunity: increasing economic mobility, wealth creation, and a sense of belonging. One of the ways they operationalize this work is through the Opportunity Marketplace, an event that brings together groundbreaking initiatives and funders from across the community.

In October 2023, KConnect entered into a formal partnership with Thrive + Prosper to develop a collaboration framework to incorporate KConnect’s Align and Design Team process into Thrive + Prosper’s Opportunity Marketplace concept as well as hosting four of the convenings over the course of 2024. KConnect is currently launching Align and Design Teams that center on Thrive + Prosper’s focus areas of wealth creation, economic mobility, and a sense of belonging. In addition, KConnect utilizes the community data found on our Data Dashboard to compile landscape analyses around focus areas to inform the process and subsequently share that information with key stakeholders.

The Arts & Culture Collective of Grand Rapids (ACCGR) is a community-driven initiative dedicated to enhancing, promoting, and advocating for the arts and culture sector in greater Grand Rapids. KConnect partnered with the Collective in Fall 2023 to facilitate convenings, embed Collective Impact into the work, and develop a custom decision-making protocol to move the group and community forward. The Collective and KConnect will co-create a final report with high-leverage activities aimed at advancing the mission of ACCGR.

Since KConnect became involved in late 2023, the group has accomplished the following:

- Established a leadership and steering committee structure to guide the work moving forward
- Established a decision-making protocol, based on KConnect's Accountability Partners Council process, for the group to make collective decisions and advance the movement
- Affirmed a letter of support for an economic impact study focused on Arts and Culture in the great Grand Rapids area by the City of Grand Rapids and Grand Valley State University. In January 2024, the City of Grand Rapids approved this study.

More information to follow as the work evolves.
Three of the KConnect Backbone staff attended the StriveTogether conference in San Francisco in September 2023 to present to hundreds of other Collective Impact Backbone leaders and system conveners.

Our Director of Communications, Katie Hop, and First Steps Kent’s Communication Director, Megan Streng, presented about developing storytelling campaigns for system change using their co-created Communications for Change toolkit. They used the example of the Normal was Never Enough campaign to illustrate how collective impact organizations and local conveners can collaborate on system-level communications.

KConnect President Salvador López and Vice-President Mark Woltman hosted a workshop on the Accountability Partners Council and the voting protocol, focusing on implementing community voice in strategy development. The participants walked through a speed round of the voting protocol on this controversial statement - “We would like to affirm that a hot dog is a sandwich.” (We would like to share that the people have spoken on behalf of the StriveTogether network that a hot dog is, indeed, a sandwich.)

As a consultancy focused on building capacity around system building, CivicLab has been a long-time partner and played a key role in our work as we redefined what it means to dissolve inequitable systems in our community. We are currently in the process of collaborating on a comprehensive toolkit that will serve as a resource for communities striving to address systemic challenges using the Dissolution Continuum.

In December 2023, KConnect President and Vice-President Salvador López and Mark Woltman, respectively, presented at the annual convening of Talent Hubs and the National Talent Network. This conference in Mobile, Alabama, brought together leaders and practitioners from higher education, philanthropy, workforce agencies, economic development, government, and the nonprofit sector.

First, Salvador and Mark led a workshop entitled “Centering Community Voice in Strategy Development,” which focused on authentically engaging with communities as organizations build a vision to close the disparity gaps most impacting youth and families. Later in the convening, they hosted a screening of the documentary “Finding Home: America’s Housing Crisis in Kent County.” This documentary, done in partnership with Candor Media and Housing Kent, follows the stories of three different families as they face housing insecurity, as well as the work that KConnect did over three years to build a system that addresses the issue.

Ranging from Naming the System to Co-Creating a Just System, we have combined our tools, resources, and frameworks aimed at operationalizing the Dissolution Continuum as it is applied to complex social inequities.
KConnect’s President, Salvador López, presented at an international conference in partnership with This Day (UK) and the Collective Change Lab (US). This Day is a nonprofit organization helping young people access opportunities to thrive by investing in leaders and organizations working toward systemic change. The Collective Change Lab brings transformational collective change practices to social and environmental problem-solving through research, leadership development, practice, and narrative change.

Salvador discussed various topics such as the culture of perfectionism, cross-sector collaboration, building trust among partners, and integrating lived experience voice in strategy development.

The presentation also focused on how equity is central to KConnect’s work and how we operationalize it in Kent County. Salvador and the Backbone team are in the process of collaborating with the Collective Impact Forum on additional speaking engagements throughout 2024.
Recognition and Acknowledgements
Welcome New Board Members

Vanessa Greene
Vanessa Greene is a leader and strategist specializing in racial and health equity. Vanessa has a 30+ year track record of getting things done, while maintaining her commitment to social justice and equity. In her current role as CEO of Grand Rapids African American Health Institute, Vanessa approaches health equity from a data driven, systems-level lens and leads with quality, purpose, impact and integrity. She works with physicians, health care systems, insurance providers, educators and businesses to advocate for resources and opportunities to support the needs, well-being and quality of life for others.

Vanessa began her career advocating for adults with disabilities and went on to spend more than 25 years in higher education at Grand Valley State University and Hope College, where she worked as Director of the Center for Diversity and Inclusion and Associate Dean of Students. Of all her roles, serving as mentor to young adult leaders has been the most rewarding. Vanessa completed her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Grand Valley State University. She also earned certifications in diversity consulting and grant writing from University of Michigan and Academic Networks.

Jacob Maas
Jacob Maas is the Chief Executive Officer of West Michigan Works!, the workforce development agency for Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon and Ottawa counties. With over 20 years of experience in the public sector, ten of those as CEO, Jacob is committed to creating systems that meet the needs of communities and to providing a demand and data-driven direction for region’s talent development efforts.

As CEO, Jacob played an integral role in the 2015 merger of four Michigan Works! agencies to become one agency. The agency is focused on recognizing and valuing the unique needs of a region that serves both urban and rural communities; start-ups and major corporations; and a diverse job-seeker population.

West Michigan Works! is a trusted resource for the state when it is redesigning or launching programs and for like-minded organizations and partnerships; it regularly shares its innovative practices through local, state and federal conferences, podcasts and webinars. Jacob credits this focus on leadership and innovation for the workforce board’s 2015 Board of Excellence Award from the Michigan Works! Association, the 2019 WIOA Trailblazer Award, the 2022 Excellence in Partnership and Collaboration Award from the National Association of Workforce Boards and the 2022 Registered Apprenticeship Best Practice Award from the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals.
Randy Thelen

As President & CEO of The Right Place, Randy leads economic development strategy through collaboration with local, State, and national organizations and stakeholders. His role is central to the organization’s core work of business retention, expansion, and attraction within the community, while aligning with The Right Place’s mission of driving sustainable economic growth and shared prosperity for all in the Greater Grand Rapids Region.

Randy joined The Right Place team in 2021 after serving as Senior Vice President of economic development at the Downtown Denver Partnership. There he led efforts to attract investment, recruit and retain business, and advocate for housing, retail, and public policy initiatives. He supported downtown projects totaling more than $1 billion in investments.

Prior to his role at the Downtown Denver Partnership, he led the Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership, a two-state, eight-county regional economic development effort. Randy executed a $24 million Prosper Omaha strategy which brought $3.9 billion in new capital investment and 13,000 new jobs to the area.

Randy’s career began at economic development organizations in Evart and Monroe, Michigan before he moved to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). From there, he was hired as the first President of Lakeshore Advantage, where he led attraction of $1.2 billion in investments and 8,000 jobs during his 10-year tenure.
Original Board Members Leaving the Board

This year, we bid farewell to some incredible community partners and original board members who have been instrumental in our collective journey. After a decade of dedicated service, Teresa Weatherall Neal and Lynne Ferrell retired from our Board of Trustees this year, leaving behind a legacy of impact. Their tenure as Board members has been marked by unwavering commitment and strategic insight that has profoundly impacted our work. “I don’t know where KConnect would be without Lynne and Teresa’s leadership and support,” says Salvador. “Their ability to analyze complex issues by considering the interconnected elements within a system is truly remarkable.”

Though they may be stepping down from the board, their spirit and influence will continue to shape our work. Thank you for being the architects of positive change and for leaving an indelible mark on the community.

Teresa Weatherall Neal, M.Ed.
Teresa Weatherall Neal, M.Ed. had been with Grand Rapids Public Schools since she was four years old, first as a K-12 student and then as a student worker, administrative assistant, coordinator of compliance, and assistant superintendent before rising to the role of superintendent. Teresa is very active in her community. She currently serves on numerous boards including Spectrum Healthier Communities, Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital, President Gerald R. Ford Foundation, Downtown Grand Rapids Development Board, and the Governor’s Educational Committee. She has received recognition and awards from local, state, and national entities for her leadership accomplishments.

Lynne Ferrell
Lynne recently concluded her 23-year tenure at the Frey Foundation, one of the largest family foundations in Michigan. As a member of the foundation’s leadership team, Lynne informed organizational culture and strategy. She also provided leadership on major community-impact initiatives including affordable housing and equity in community-based early care and education. Lynne has served on a number of community boards including the Council of Michigan Foundations, First Steps Kent, the YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids, KConnect and Housing Kent. She was named the 2019 recipient for the Dr. Gerald K. Smith Award for Philanthropy by the Michigan Forum for African Americans in Philanthropy – an award that honors the work and grantmaking activities promoting social change in communities of color. She was also presented with the 2024 Ebenezer Award by ICCF recognizing collaborative efforts in support the provision of safe, equitable, affordable housing.
Recognitions

**FORMER BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEMBER**

**Dr. Juan Olivarez**

As Dr. Juan Olivarez retires from the KConnect Board of Trustees, we want to thank him for his dedication and insight that have been instrumental in driving positive change within our community. We are immensely grateful for his leadership, guidance, and countless hours he has dedicated to the work. When asked how Dr. Olivarez impacted KConnect, Salvador said, “Dr. Juan Olivarez is a revered leader with an illustrious career that exemplifies unwavering commitment to uplifting his community. Dr. Olivarez’s empathetic leadership style, coupled with his strategic vision and tireless dedication, left an indelible mark on the KConnect network.”

We deeply appreciate your ongoing efforts to promote justice and equality within our community. Thank you for your dedication to equity and your unwavering support.

Juan has spent the past 52 years as an educator and social justice advocate. Throughout his career he worked in a variety of positions within pre-K – higher education. He started as a teacher, became a school psychologist, held positions in management, and eventually served as president of two colleges. Juan also spent six years in the philanthropy sector promoting equitable distribution of funds to non-profit organizations. Besides his work life, Juan has served on dozens of local, state, and national non-profit Boards, all contributing to the betterment of community and society.

**LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSULTANT**

**Eric Freeman**

Eric serves as the Community Engagement Co-Chair and sits on the Business Ownership Align and Design Team. He supports this work primarily as a lived experience expert and brings a unique perspective that emphasizes being responsive to the true needs of the community.

“As a leader of the Community Engagement Workgroup, Eric is unapologetic about grounding our decisions and conversations in lived experience. He’s willing to ask the tough questions and challenge the status quo to ensure equity in this work.” - Dr. Shayla Young, Postdoctoral Fellow

Eric Freeman is an entrepreneur and thought leader focused on justice, nutrition, and well-being. He is working diligently to provide flavorful, nourishing meal choices and peace of mind for people in underserved communities through his social enterprise start-up Mindset Meals. He believes people should have the ability to thrive, not just survive.
KCONNECT CHAMPION
Neil Carlson

Neil Carlson has had a significant impact on KConnect since its inception. As the inaugural co-chair of the Data and Capacity Workgroup and the first Accountability Partners Council co-chair, Neil has continuously contributed his time and expertise to strengthening KConnect’s processes and frameworks around gathering, visualizing, and sharing data, including conceptualizing the Community Data Trust. He also played an essential role in the development of the Accountability Partners Council and the KConnect Voting Protocol. Neil still serves on the Data and Capacity Workgroup and often serves as a thought partner for the Backbone team.

“Dr. Carlson has been a champion of KConnect from day one. From being the original Data and Capacity Workgroup Co-Chair to the inaugural APC Co-Chair to helping design the Data Dashboard, Neil’s thoughts and ideas are foundational to the KConnect of today. I often say that if KConnect started making t-shirts, Neil would be the first to get one.” - Mark Woltman, Vice President

Neil Carlson, PhD is Founder and Principal Consultant (and Chief Inventor of Pompous Job Titles) at DataWise Consulting, LLC. He received his doctorate in political science from Duke University in 2004 and has led the DataWise team and its predecessor for almost 20 years. Neil delights in solving problems by linking team culture to technology. He’s absurdly interested in just about everything, but when forced to focus, his research interests tend toward civic engagement, organizational culture, religion and politics, the digital transformation of society, and science and technology policy. Research, experience, and relationships combine to make him a diehard fan of collective impact in general and KConnect in particular.

KCONNECT CHAMPION
Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell

Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell has been integral to KConnect for nearly a decade. Starting as a member of the DEI Workgroup in 2015, Dr. Lovelady Mitchell soon became a 4-12th Grade Workgroup co-chair as well as the Accountability Partners Council co-chair. Presently, as the co-chair of the KConnect Board of Trustees, Dr. Lovelady Mitchell remains dedicated to advocating for the reduction of disparity gaps and the establishment of a just and inclusive community.

“Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell’s ability to provide incredible insights and know-how about navigating intrinsic systems has been demonstrated in her work with KConnect workgroups, the backbone, and with the Board of Trustees level. Her leadership has been interwoven in almost all of our work over the last ten years, making her a KConnect Champion.” - Salvador López, President

Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell is a lifelong children’s advocate who is passionate about community, education, and designing systems that maximize human potential. Her doctoral studies focused on high-achieving Black males at the secondary level. She has increased opportunities and attainment for high schoolers to enroll and earn early college credit, find scholarships, and earn industry credentials. Dr. Lovelady Mitchell has coached and empowered educational executives, school board members, educators, and other stakeholders pertaining to equitable and culturally responsive practices. In addition to her role as Deputy Superintendent of Preschool-12 Learning & Leadership at Grand Rapids Public Schools, Dr. Lovelady Mitchell serves as an elected official on the board of Grand Rapids Community College as well as the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.
Thank You to our 2023 Funders

Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation
Frey Foundation
Grand Rapids Community Foundation
Heart of West Michigan United Way
Michigan Health Endowment Fund
New Schools Venture Fund
Richard & Helen DeVos Foundation
Steelcase Foundation
The Meijer Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Wege Foundation