

Building Trust and Climate Resilience to Advance Equity in Austin



Mission:

GAVA organizes and mobilizes community power to reduce barriers to health while increasing institutional capacity to respond to the people most impacted by historic inequities

As a grant-funded partner in the Climate Change Health and Equity (CCHE) network, Go Austin/Vamos Austin (GAVA) has been working to address the disproportionate impacts of flooding, heat, and chronic health risks experienced by communities in Southeast and North Central Austin to achieve health equity. Their efforts align with the overall [CCHE Theory of Change](#) as part of Strategy 3.

Through their CCHE-funded activities, detailed below, GAVA has advanced community-driven and resident-led climate resilience actions. These efforts have elevated community infrastructure priorities within public institutions and increased community leadership in equitable climate action. Over the long term, GAVA aimed for the communities it works with to be healthy, stable, and thriving, with residents who trusted in local political processes. GAVA's CCHE-funded activities are outlined in a 2022 theory of change, [here \(slide 22\)](#) and described in more detail below. Key partners in GAVA's CCHE-funded work are listed at the end of the document.

Policies, Activities, and Initiatives Advanced During the CCHE Initiative

Communities and cities increased their preparedness for natural disasters.

GAVA has continued to train "Climate Navigators", residents who were equipped to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to neighborhood shocks and stressors. 93 residents completed the level one Climate Navigator training, including 64 Parent Support Specialists from the Austin Independent School District. These specialists engaged with families, school staff, and community members to foster effective school-community partnerships and provide educational workshops. Resident leaders collaborated with GAVA staff, city departments, and community partners to develop an advanced level Climate Navigator training and shaped a Block Captain training where residents continued to develop leadership, organize their neighborhoods, and coordinate with institutions. Block captains served as key contacts for their neighborhoods during climate stressors.

Austin City Council Member Fuentes put forward Item 27 to approve a resolution adopting the City's Federal Legislative Agenda for the 118th Congress. As a result of GAVA's work, it included the language, "The City of

Select Resources and Media

- [NOAA heat impact study puts faces to local effects of 2023 heat wave](#)
- [2023 RWJF Culture of Health Prize Winner](#)
- [Austin seeks feedback as it overhauls approach to protecting waterways and communities](#)
- [Texas researchers, Austin activists partner on new Climate Atlas](#)
- [Where the water runs Storytelling, Co-Production and Community-Based Park Design in Dove Springs, Austin, Texas](#)
- [Woman helps prepare her Austin, Texas, neighborhood for the next flood](#)

Austin further supports funding programs to assist residents with reducing and eliminating the risk of flood damage and making flood insurance more affordable to low income-residents.”

Communities implemented a new approach to identifying and building infrastructure projects. GAVA collaborated with residents to identify community infrastructure priorities to address flood risks. GAVA organizers and residents then led city staff on a tour, showcasing these community-identified needs. This advocacy was instrumental in getting the Watershed Protection Department to reconsider and overhaul its process, allowing for quick prioritization and fast-tracking of projects in these areas. The Watershed Protection Department, managing around 60 creeks in Central Texas, has started to take on drainage fixes internally rather than waiting for outside contractors. Building relationships within the department has been crucial. Engineers, guided by community leaders, have begun to understand the real impacts of flooding on health disparities, using qualitative data to effectively reprioritize projects. This holistic approach has not only addressed flooding but also highlighted the interconnectedness of environmental and health issues in neighborhoods.

GAVA strengthened communication pathways with government partners to hold them accountable for responding to residents’ climate change concerns. In addition to GAVA working with the City’s Watershed Protection Department and connecting residents to city staff regarding infrastructure, GAVA also worked with Homeland Security and Emergency Management on disaster preparedness training workshops, making the jargon about preparedness more accessible.

Residents identified, initiated, and led efforts to reduce the negative impacts of flood risks, extreme heat, grass fire risks, and other climate shocks and stressors that strained community health and the ability of residents to stay in their neighborhoods. For example, in partnership with GAVA, TreeFolks (an urban forestry nonprofit based in Austin, Texas, dedicated to empowering Central Texans to build stronger communities through planting and caring for trees) trained 25 residents who completed the Climate Navigator training to become Tree Ambassadors. These ambassadors helped residents to participate in tree planting events. They educated their neighbors on proper planting techniques, tree care, and the “Right Tree, Right Place” principle, which ensured trees are planted in locations that avoided conflicts with power lines and buildings. Through this initiative, 162 residents signed up to receive around 300 trees for planting.

Residents’ mentality significantly shifted from a sense of resignation – “I can’t do anything, so why should I try to make changes?” – to one of empowerment and proactive engagement. Initially, while residents were aware of climate change issues, they lacked the knowledge on how to address them. Over time, they have grown, learned, built capacity, and reduced their reliance on GAVA community organizers. Residents became adept at researching issues, contacting city leaders, and sharing resources with each other. These changes have been tremendous, enabling residents to effectively mitigate the impacts of natural disasters by building emergency kits and staying informed. In fact, in a recent local data set collected between 2023-2024, more Dove Springs residents reported having an emergency kit prepared at home (68%) compared to residents living across the City of Austin (57%). This transformation highlighted the community’s resilience and ability to adapt to climate challenges. For example, three residents who worked alongside GAVA spoke to the Parks and Recreation Department board to advocate for trail improvements, beautification measures, and a mural along a trail in the East Williamson Creek Greenbelt. The Neighborhood Partnering Program, managed by the Austin Parks and Recreation Department, awarded over \$300,000 to this project. Residents worked with GAVA staff, city staff, and UT Professor, Bjorn Sletto, from the School of Architecture to further develop design and maintenance details. Residents will maintain the plantings on site over the next few years.

Academic institutions increasingly collaborated with GAVA. GAVA has engaged in at least four different research projects and collaborations, several of which have directly funded community efforts, such as the Climate Navigator project with the School of Architecture. GAVA has also collaborated with two UT Austin professors from the LBJ School of Public Affairs and the Cockrell School of Engineering to understand the kinds of localized flooding that residents experienced and what interest they had in deploying green infrastructure to mitigate flooding. As part of this effort, three sensors were placed in South Austin in Brassiewood, Creekbend, and Nuckols Crossing to monitor flooding. The sensors notified both residents and city staff of rising water levels. GAVA and UT also collaborated to develop maps that identified areas with localized flooding. Current flood maps did not account for lot-to-lot flooding caused by increased urbanization or localized flooding from outdated infrastructure. These collaborations involved checking assumptions with the community and engaging residents to inform the creation of data tools for advocacy.

See this grant-funded partners’ CCHE theory of change (2022) [here](#).

Insights from CCHE Initiative

- **GAVA has grown significantly through its engagement with CCHE.** Initially focused on childhood obesity, GAVA developed a climate resilience portfolio with Kresge as its first funder explicitly supporting work on climate. This shift required adapting messaging for other funders and navigating adjustments to internal workflows. Over time, the organization expanded from having a single climate resilience funder to approximately five funders. A dedicated climate team was established. This journey has taught GAVA to balance doing less but more effectively, ultimately transforming into an organization focused on Non-Medical Drivers of Health (NMDOH) and climate resilience.
- **Each new funder brought specific focus areas, requiring capacity building and often leading to divergent directions, especially with research projects.** This necessitates careful cost-benefit analysis of research commitments. Significant time and effort were spent on adapting to different funders' requirements and attending meetings, which detracted from community work. Identifying more general operating expenses and flexible funding opportunities is crucial. Such funding, like the Kresge grant, allowed for greater operational freedom and sustainability.
- **This work is not urgent, until it is.** The 2021 Texas winter storm emergency was the first natural disaster where everyone was impacted, and no one could escape it; every institution had to face it. Sometimes leaders did not understand the community's needs until they experienced the issues themselves.
- **This work required extensive collaboration and communication.** Collaboration across institutions locally, regionally, and nationally, demanded significant bandwidth and capacity but advanced GAVA's work.
- **Trusting the community's deep internal knowledge was crucial.** Transitioning to climate work and flood mitigation as a means to equitable infrastructure and health required faith, especially since GAVA's catalyst funder was skeptical and adding a new portfolio required a large shift for the GAVA team. Without GAVA's Executive Director's relationship with the community and GAVA's Community Organizers' lived experience, it would not have been clear that addressing floods was essential.

Looking Ahead

GAVA is excited to address issues of water scarcity and access, focusing on water equity. Funders are keen to involve GAVA in these conversations, ensuring residents are equipped with the tools and resources they need to collaborate with institutions and collectives. Educating the community on what water equity means is a key part of this effort. Additionally, GAVA is thrilled to see others taking on pieces of its work. GAVA has been working hard with residents and partners to develop a resilience portal to guide people, organizations, and networks in climate emergencies, and provide data for long term policy decisions. Their partner, Community Resilience Trust, is hosting the resilience portal which will be launched soon for public use.

GAVA's work is leading to increased community safety and resilience, though displacement pressure and climate shocks are increasing. Recognizing that not everyone can be protected from displacement, GAVA is looking to organize in regions outside of their target communities, as the impacts are regional. "We've reduced displacement and helped people through climate shocks and the leadership is carrying people better, but I don't want to deny that the pressure is on, and I don't know if we can actually reduce climate shocks and stressors, but we can improve our resilience."

Key Partners

Organization	Type
American YouthWorks	Community Partner
American Flood Coalition	Environmental Partner
Austin Civilian Conservation Corps	Community Partner
City of Austin	Government Partner
Climate Navigators	Community Members

Organization	Type
Department of Homeland Security	Government Partner
EcoRise	Community Partner
Forklift Danceworks	Community Partner
Homeland Emergency Management Services	Government Partner
Network for Public Health Law	Other/Public Sector Organization
Residents of Southeast and North Central Austin	Community Members
Save Our Springs Alliance	Community Partner
Siglo Group	Environmental Partner
Tapi Story	Community Partner
TreeFolks	Community Partner
University of Texas (Schools of Architecture, Public Affairs, Geosciences)	Academic Partner